

MISGUIDED MISSILE

The little island of St. Swithin's, fifteen miles off the mainland, housed a most secret research station working on a method of intercepting ballistic missiles. This made it a very ticklish problem for Chief Inspector Baker and Sergeant Hughes to investigate the murder of the island's Commanding Officer. Bedevilled by the need to conceal their inquiries, and surrounded by R.A.F. officers and scientists — not to mention a few Whitehall V.I.P.s — all anxious that even Scotland Yard should not look too closely at their very secret electronic equipment, the C.I.D. men found their task no easy one, particularly as nearly all those involved in the inquiry had had good reason to fear and dislike the murdered man—and to wish him dead.

Also by OSMINGTON MILLS

·NO MATCH FOR THE LAW
THE CASE OF THE FLYING FIFTEEN
UNLUCKY BREAK

MISGUIDED MISSILE

by
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**This book is fiction and all the characters
and incidents in it are entirely imaginary**

CHAPTER ONE

IF, DURING A CONVERSATION OVER A CRACKLING AND FAULTY telephone line, one speaker's voice is cut off abruptly in a noise like a pistol shot, it is natural for the other speaker to assume it is the telephone line, and not the conversationalist himself, which has suddenly "died on him". So Sergeant Craig, at Turvey radar station, was no more than mildly exasperated when, after the pistol-shot noise, he found he could no longer raise a reply on the Little Eva line.

Sergeant Craig's exasperation had begun the moment the Little Eva telephone rang. His radar station, Turvey, was a small outpost belonging to the Royal Air Force, but on that wild October night it was on watch not for the benefit of its own Service but for the Royal Navy. It was taking part, reluctantly, in the Navy's "Exercise Whirlwind", a tiresome ten-day series of anti-submarine manoeuvres up and down the English Channel.

"Exercise Whirlwind" was not an inter-Service exercise and did not involve many aircraft, so most of the R.A.F. coastal radars had escaped being involved. But Turvey had the misfortune to be a low-cover radar, whose equipment tracked shipping as well as aircraft. In consequence, for the last four days while the R.A.F. Sector at Bishop Bradbury had been benevolently releasing the coastal radars every evening between five and six o'clock when the Sector itself "stood down" for the night, Turvey had been unenthusiastically remaining on duty to observe shipping for the Royal Navy.

This would have disgusted Turvey in any event; but it

would not have been so disgusting, thought Sergeant Craig and his radar crew, if the Navy had provided any shipping to observe. But the exercise, as these exercises inevitably seemed to be, had been timed to take place during the stormiest and most forbidding ten days of the year, and the Navy was spending most of "Exercise Whirlwind" harbour-bound.

On that particular day, Sergeant Craig, before coming on night watch at midnight, had already put in an afternoon watch, ending at six. During that time, he had pleasantly watched the weather conditions worsening until he felt sure that even the most energetic Sea Lord would be forced to abandon the exercise when darkness fell. All afternoon, the Turvey radar scanner had been picking up storm-clouds rolling out to sea from the landmass behind the radar station until, when the afternoon crew went off duty, there were storms painting up nearly all the way out to Cherbourg, in France.

Of submarines, and of vessels intercepting submarines, there had been no sign all day. The only vessel the Turvey radar had seen at all was a small, courageous motor-launch ploughing painfully across to the mainland from St. Swithin's Island, a little island off the Midset coast picturesquely reputed to be inhabited by a crazy bird-watcher Earl. The St. Swithin's motor-launch made a regular daily, and often twice-daily, trip across the fifteen miles of sea to the mainland, and Sergeant Craig, who knew its course intimately, knew that it usually made the journey in just under or just over an hour. This time, he watched it battling through a head-wind of near-gale force for nearly three hours before it made harbour. If that was the situation for an all-weather motor-launch, mused the satisfied Turvey radar sergeant, it was unthinkable that the Royal Navy could go on much longer pretending it could send off coveys of unseaworthy submarines that night.

When the evening watch took over at six o'clock, Sergeant Craig was not expecting to be called up on night watch at all. At midnight, he was disillusioned. But, by six minutes to two

in the morning, when the call-light from the Little Eva line began to flash, he was still confidently expecting a "stand-down" order from the Navy at any minute.

The call-light from Little Eva was ominous and unwelcome.

"Now, what the devil will *they* be wanting at this hour?" queried Sergeant Craig suspiciously, eying the flashing light without making any attempt to answer it. "It'll be just our jolly good British luck, I suppose, if the Navy at long last gets round to jacking it up for the night, and we get Little Eva starting up instead. Let 'em ring for a bit," he instructed his corporal, optimistically. "If we don't answer, perhaps they'll think we've been stood down already."

Little Eva was something of a mystery to the Turvey radar crews. They knew that it was an experimental unit, presumably concerned with radar since it had taken its code-name from Turvey itself, and that it was one of the "clients" for the information on aircraft and shipping movements which Turvey produced for the Sector at Bishop Bradbury. But what Little Eva did with the information, or even where it was when it did whatever it did, Turvey had never discovered.

"They'll never want to start work at this time of night, not if the exercise packs up, surely?" said the corporal of the watch uncomfortably. He had the unhappy temperament of someone who cannot let a telephone ring without answering it.

"You don't know," Sergeant Craig warned him pessimistically. "I know that ten-foot-six C.O. of theirs—Squadron Leader Merlin—of old. He's one of these keen characters who's always bright and eager to start work any time, anywhere. Ah, good!" he exclaimed, as the call-light obligingly stopped flashing.

The danger of Squadron Leader Merlin's working enthusiasm being thus averted, Sergeant Craig was prepared to be magnanimous.

"Mind you," he philosophised sanctimoniously, remembering his duties to the younger airmen, "there's no getting away from it, that's the way to be if you want to get on. Now,

Merlin—when I first knew him, he couldn't tell a P.P.I. tube from an I.T.V. show. He was our technical officer at Bad Hausenheim: came straight off his course, and I doubt if he'd ever seen a live Operations Room before. I reckon everything Merlin knows on the ops side, he learned off me. He was completely green—just one of those comic college boy officers with a university degree instead of a brain, driving about in a great big car he probably still hasn't finished paying for, and thinking he was what all the girls had joined the W.R.A.F. for. But there was one thing about him—he wasn't a skiver. Any time of the day or night, he'd come up and take a spell learning the ops side with us. So look at him now. Squadron Leader in charge of his own outfit, while I'm sitting around with the same old three tapes up and still no crown."

He swore softly as the Little Eva call-light began flashing again, resigned himself, and threw the answer-key forward.

"Topsy," he announced himself conventionally, by Turvey's own code-name; and then, unblushingly, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Little Eva. I was on another line."

There was a moment's silence from Little Eva, broken only by the crackling and babbling noises the Little Eva line always made in bad weather. Then the sergeant heard a faint, nervous whisper of "Hello, are you there? Can you hear me?"

At this unorthodox variation on the usual streamlined radar telephone approach, Sergeant Craig eyed his earpiece in astonishment. His immediate impulse was to bellow witheringly, "No, I'm here, and how would you expect me to answer you if I couldn't hear you?" But, bad as the Little Eva line was, he thought he could distinguish something in the nervous overture which stamped it as an "officer voice", so he contented himself with bellowing, but bellowing politely, "You're very faint, sir. Try throwing your switch once or twice."

There were a few feverish clicks, followed by a slightly more audible and very urgent "Is that better? This is the loudest I can talk. Listen". Sergeant Craig obediently listened, but all

he heard was a sudden startled and much louder "Oh!" followed by another voice, very low and faint in the background, instructing patiently, "Tell them you're testing the line."

"A trainee!" ejaculated Sergeant Craig aloud, with one cautious hand over the mouthpiece; and wished his own ex-trainee, Squadron Leader Merlin, a remarkably evil stroke of fortune for choosing that time of night to inflict his pupils on the Turvey radar station.

"I'm testing the line," the nervous Little Eva voice repeated obediently, but with a great lack of conviction.

"Roger, sir," the Turvey sergeant encouraged him paternally. "If you ring off now, I'll test you back."

He heard the trembling voice repeat blindly: "He says, if I ring off now he'll test me back," and the instructor's reply, still patient but with an edge to it, "Right. Ring off then, and wait for his call. Just ring off—don't say anything else."

The sergeant, happily unaware that these instructions were being issued at pistol-point, reached unhurriedly for his log to record the test-call. He ran a swift eye over the last few pages to discover when was the last time the Little Eva line had been manned up, found reassuringly that it was before "Exercise Whirlwind" started four days earlier, and then gave the test-call back.

The instructor had evidently been making good use of the intervening period, for this time the Little Eva man appeared to have been told exactly what to say.

"Little Eva," he acknowledged the test-call in the correct, conventional manner.

"Topsy testing you back, sir. Did you get my call?"

"Yes, thank you, Topsy." There was a moment's hesitation, and then the Little Eva speaker began, "Topsy, this is——"

Who or what "this" was, Topsy was never to learn; for, at that moment, the voice ended in what Sergeant Craig afterwards guessed was a deep human gasp, and then an almost instantaneous explosion.

He clicked his own call-switch once or twice impatiently, to clear the interference. Then, no further sound coming from the Little Eva speaker, he began calling the distant station by name.

The line crackled and burbled sociably to him, but there was no human reply. Then, as he was still calling, the crackling and burbling ceased too.

Sergeant Craig threw his call-switch a few more times, but still nothing happened.

"That fixes Little Eva, then," he observed cheerfully to the corporal, lifting another telephone to report the line failure to the Sector at Bishop Bradbury. "The line's gone U/S. So now, if the Navy'll only make up its mind to be sensible, we're all set for a night in bed."

He sat back happily to wait for the "stand-down" as his Operations Room chronometer moved round to two o'clock.

But the Navy had no pusillanimous intention of being sensible; and two hours later, when the Turvey chronometer had gone past four o'clock, Sergeant Craig was still waiting, and regarding with great admiration the radar track of another small motor-launch which had put out from Yewmouth towards St. Swithin's Island.

"I wonder what this fellow's up to," mused Sergeant Craig, intelligently. "Do you know what—I bet you there must be someone pretty sick on St. Swithin's, and that's a doctor doing out."

His guess was close, but not accurate. There was someone not sick, but dead on St. Swithin's, and no doctor could have done anything for him.

This was just as well, because the little motor-launch was not carrying a doctor. It was carrying a party of telephone engineers sent out by the Bishop Bradbury Sector to test a telephone line.

CHAPTER TWO

SQUADRON LEADER MERLIN, THE OFFICER COMMANDING LITTLE Eva and St. Swithin's Island, was nagged from a deep sleep by the insistent baying of dogs; for, Bishop Bradbury having been unable to advise the human guards of the island that a boat was on the way, the engineers were now being frenziedly greeted as enemies by the three powerful Alsations who also guarded St. Swithin's.

Bishop Bradbury had not been particularly perturbed at the line-failure report from Turvey. The "operational line" which linked Turvey and Little Eva was an old wartime cable which not infrequently gave trouble. But there was a second cable, the "administrative link", by which St. Swithin's was connected to the public G.P.O. exchange at Yewmouth; and when Bishop Bradbury, calling the island on this public telephone number, still failed to gain a reply, the Sector signals officer took action.

Turvey had given him no very detailed report of the conversation which had preceded the pistol-shot noise, so he did not, even then, suspect that the telephone line had been deliberately severed. But he could not leave the highly-secret Little Eva outpost out of touch with the mainland indefinitely.

It took Merlin, lying in bed some three hundred yards inland from the island's little landing-stage, several minutes to disentangle from the symphony of storm-noises the jarring alarm which had aroused him. Rain was lashing along his bedroom window and wind howling at his door and chimney and, more distantly, the sea was crashing rhythmically against the shore.

The dogs' barks waxed and waned as they were caught and dropped by the wind, but eventually Merlin identified them.

Merlin was not unaccustomed to being awoken in a fright by the guard dogs. By daylight, they were kennelled in a wire-netted enclosure beside the Service Police guard-hut by the landing-stage, but during the hours of darkness they were let loose to patrol around at will. The purpose of this patrol was to guard the secret Little Eva Operations Block in the centre of the half-mile-long island. But the dogs, being zealous animals, not infrequently exceeded their duty and took it into their heads to guard the domestic site as well. Merlin had been similarly aroused several times by a furious notification from the dogs that the early-morning kitchen staff were getting up and coming on duty.

He groped comatosely for his watch, saw from its fluorescent hands that it was only half past four and too early for the kitchen staff, and wondered anxiously if one of the camp's domestic pets had got out and was being torn to pieces. But the storm outside reassured him. The rain was teeming down and all sensible animals, including, Merlin realised sleepily, the Alsations themselves, would be sheltering as deep as they could from the weather. The guard dogs, he decided, would undoubtedly have taken cover in their kennels. That meant that the furore must be at the landing-stage, and he ought to get up and investigate it.

He stretched his seventy-seven inches of warm, supine body protestingly, sat up and at once became uneasily aware that he was not feeling at all well. He had hardly been to sleep at all that night, his head was aching from the rowdy awakening and he felt very hot and feverish. To add to all this, he suddenly remembered with a great flood of self-pity, he was desperately unhappy. He had been trying to make up his mind whether or not he would have to commit suicide when he fell asleep, and the problem was still unresolved.

He damned the dogs miserably, decided that he did not want

to wake up after all and buried his head in the pillow again. He was still making a determined effort to drift back to the kindly oblivion of sleep when there was a knock at the door, the room flooded with light and the duty telephone operator peered in.

"Excuse me, sir, I've got the guard-room on the line. They say there's a boat lying off the landing-stage with some telephone men aboard. They've been trying to raise us from the mainland, but the line's U/S."

Merlin sat up reluctantly.

"So that's what the dogs are kicking up about." He considered the news, and then surveyed his telephonist with the glimmer of a smile.

"I gather from your air of conscious rectitude," he inquired, "that the line really is U/S this time? I mean, you've tested it from our end?"

The telephonist acknowledged this oblique reference with a sheepish and conspiratorial grin. The island had lost contact with the mainland like this once before, with most uncomfortable consequences both for the telephonist and for the squadron leader responsible for his efficiency. On that occasion, the telephonist had been guilty of falling asleep at his P.B.X. switchboard without taking the preliminary simple safeguard of switching on the P.B.X. night alarm bell. He had then slept stolidly through a midnight emergency call from St. Swithin's parent unit at Ramswell, on the mainland, summoning one of the island airmen to be rushed home on compassionate leave to a dying mother.

The airman had reached his home in time. But the cost of getting him there had included the charter of a civilian boat to take a messenger from Ramswell to the island; and the double pay claimed by the G.P.O. linesman from Yewmouth, who came over with the messenger to find out why the St. Swithin's P.B.X. was not registering the ringing tone.

This piece of forgetfulness had cost Squadron Leader Merlin

a painful half-hour at Ramswell, learning a long list of his shortcomings as a sub-commander and persuading his efficient superior commander, Wing Commander Swanton, to tell him what to write in the ensuing letter of explanation to the Air Ministry. In revenge, Merlin had extracted from the telephonist three unpleasant weeks of fatigues.

"Yes, sir, it's U/S all right this time," said the telephonist reassuringly. "I checked it as soon as I got the guard-room call, and I can't raise a sausage."

Merlin sighed. The telephone engineers would, he knew, expect to begin their tests from the island's big master switch-rack inside the Operations Block, into which both the mainland cables were initially fed. That meant that, before they could be admitted, someone would have to turn out into the rain to shroud the secret Little Eva equipment from their gaze.

He pondered over the temptation of ordering out the duty officer, and sending him into the rain instead, but resisted it.

"All right," he said. "I'll get over to the Block and check them on the ops line. Tell the S.P. to let the boat alongside, but keep the party in the guard-room until I've checked them. You'd better get the early-duty cook out of bed, too, and get something hot laid on for them before they start work. I expect they'll be perished."

The telephonist went back to his exchange to obey. A few minutes later, Merlin, now dressed and draped in oilskins and sou'-wester, interrupted him.

"Have you had Wing Commander Swanton on any of your extensions recently?" he demanded.

"Wing Commander Swanton? No, sir."

The telephonist looked surprised. Wing Commander Swanton had arrived at the subordinate formation the previous evening, on a visit of inspection, but inspections were not usually, the telephonist thought, carried out at four-thirty in the morning.

"He's got the Ops Block keys," Merlin explained. "He had some stuff to put away in the ops safe last night, and I left

the keys with him. But he's not in his room now, and it doesn't look as if he's been to bed at all yet. He must still be over in the Block, I suppose."

The telephonist, detecting a controlled note of worry in the sub-commander's voice, looked sympathetic. Wing Commander Swanton could be an awkward customer at times, and the telephonist could well imagine why Merlin was worrying at the idea of having his superior snooping around half the night by himself in Merlin's Operations Block.

"Perhaps he's been mucking around with the master switch-rack over there, and that's what's cut us off, sir," he suggested hopefully.

Merlin so far relaxed discipline as to smile. If he had been, the telephonist's tone implied, then it was Wing Commander Swanton's turn for the wing commander equivalent of three weeks' fatigues, and no more than such midnight snooping merited.

"Well, we'll soon find out," said Merlin. "I'll get on over there, so will you ring round the Ops Block extensions and let him know I'm on the way?"

The walk to the Operations Block, which took about five minutes, was quite as cold, dark, wet and wind-buffed as Merlin had pictured it from his warm blankets, but he did not find it altogether unpleasant. The sub-commander was young for his rank and responsibilities, and by age and nature he was volatile. The telephonist's small display of friendliness over Swanton's behaviour had disproportionately cheered him and he found himself now beginning to feel that perhaps things weren't quite so unfaceable. He felt physically much better in the cold night air and enlivening wind; and, even after so short a night, he reflected cheerfully this was a new and different day. If the night could pass, the night's troubles could too.

He reached the short flight of steps which led up to the Operations Block, climbed them in two steps, and braced himself to face Victor Swanton again.

Then, shining his torch on the Operations Block door, he stopped in uneasy surprise.

The door opened outwards and in addition to its own substantial automatic lock was defended by three heavy, padlocked chains slung from steel posts driven into the ground on either side. These were now padlocked and stretched tight across the closed door.

Merlin stared at this in perturbation. No one inside the building could have drawn them into that position. They had been locked from the outside.

Puzzled and alarmed, he splashed back as fast as he could to the domestic site, and into the P.B.X. room.

"Did you get any joy from the Ops Block?" he asked.

The telephonist was also looking puzzled.

"No, sir. Not a thing."

"No, it doesn't look as if Wing Commander Swanton's *there*. Give me a line to the guard-room, will you, and let's see if they've any idea where he might be."

"I've just asked them, sir. But the S.P. says they haven't seen anything of him at all since he landed last night."

Merlin mulled this over. Then another idea struck him.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "if Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates might know."

The telephonist hid another grin at this. Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates, Swanton's chief administrative officer, had also come on the visit of inspection. The telephonist thought it more than likely, if Swanton was doing any midnight snooping, old Titus Oates would be somewhere around too, showing him how to do it.

"Go up and see if he's in his room," Merlin, still anxious, requested, "and, if he is, ask him if he'll be good enough to come down and have a word with me. Give me the guard-room meantime."

The telephonist, pleasantly intrigued, obeyed; but was disappointed to find the Ramswell squadron leader unenter-

prisingly snoring in his bed. He was further disappointed when, on his return downstairs with the Ramswell officer, Merlin drew the latter out of earshot into the hall.

"Titus, I'm sorry to rout you out in the middle of the night like this," the sub-commander apologised, "but I've just found something rather alarming. At least, I thought it was rather alarming. Then it occurred to me, before I start getting in a panic"—his face broke into an anxious and conciliatory smile—"this isn't by any chance some comic security check you and Victor have laid on between you, is it?"

The administrative officer, who was also the Ramswell security officer, blinked at him like a ruffled, elderly owl.

"What isn't?"

"I see it isn't." The smile faded from Merlin's face. "You've no idea where Victor might be at the moment?"

"Isn't he in bed?"

"No, he isn't. He hasn't been to bed all night, and, wherever he is, he's still got the Ops Block keys on him. He had that secret correspondence to put away, you remember, and I'm afraid now he's missed his way back in the dark, and tripped up over something." He put this idea as gently as he could, for "Titus" Maltby-Oates, as well as being Victor Swanton's administrative officer, had the more personal connection of being his brother-in-law. "I'm frightened he may be lying hurt somewhere, and, if so, he won't be doing himself any good in all this rain."

"Good, heavens! You must send out a search-party at once."

"Yes, I'm going to. I just thought I'd check first that it wasn't some test, though."

"No. Nothing I know about, anyway. I'll get some clothes on and come and help you."

"Righto. I'm getting the guard and the fire picket on it, but I'll have to leave Bob Ames to run it for the time being, because I've got some other trouble on hand as well. The

telephone cable's down somewhere between here and the mainland—I'm not surprised, in this weather—and there's a party of telephone kings turned up to investigate. Good thing they have, as it happens, or we shouldn't have missed Vic until breakfast. But I've got to get the Ops Block open for them, and I ought to go over and have a word with them, too—I've had them shut up in the guard-room nearly a quarter of an hour. I mustn't keep them much longer before I get the Block open. So, if I go across and see them and then brief Bob, would you mind looking in on Noel Osborne for me, Titus, and ask him for the spare set of keys for the Ops Block? He's got them on permanent loan while he's here, but I'll have to borrow them back now."

Titus nodded and hurried off to dress, Merlin, after a brief welcome to the telephone-party, went to wake his second-in-command.

Flight Lieutenant Ames, buried under a mound of blankets, showed a marked reluctance to return to consciousness. There was a perceptible atmosphere of stale beer hovering around him. When at last he took in what his superior was telling him, a look of sleepy malice spread over his plump face.

"Good," he yawned, turning over and drawing the blankets round his ears again. "And the best of luck! I hope he's broken his bloody neck."

"Don't talk like that, Bob," reproved Merlin, shocked, "when he really may have. Come on, get up. I want you to organise the search-party."

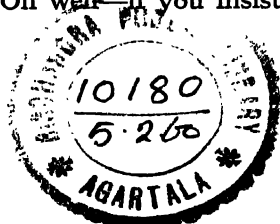
"Why me? I'm not the duty officer."

There was so much implacable hostility in his voice that Merlin drew back.

"Come on, Bob, don't make an issue of it. There isn't time to stand about arguing."

Bob examined his watch.

"Hell's bells, Wiz, it's not five o'clock yet," he complained, "and I didn't get to bed until one. Oh well—if you insist."



He cocked a relenting but still begrudging eye at the sub-commander. "But I warn you, I shan't look very hard. You know what I think of him."

Merlin, satisfied that his actions would be more dutiful than his words, left him to it and went downstairs again, where he found Titus dressed and waiting.

"I'm afraid I haven't got your keys yet, Wiz." Titus was simmering with respectful fury. "I asked Sir Noel, but he insists on coming over to the Block too. He says he wants to see there's no interference with his work there. I warned him you didn't want to waste any time, but he's a difficult man to hurry."

In spite of his worries, Merlin was able to spare a quick, smothered smile. Sir Noel Osborne, the leader of the civilian team of physicists who had devised Little Eva, who was visiting the island to carry out some experimental modifications, was one of the quickest-moving men Merlin knew. But he was also an independent and extremely contrary character, and Merlin could imagine how slow and unhurried he would be to an impatient, non-technical squadron leader dancing with imperious jitters.

"He won't keep us waiting long, I'm sure," he consoled Titus. "And he won't be holding up the search-party, that's the main thing. I've got these telephone types out of the guard-room's way, now. They're the Sector party from Bishop Bradbury, it appears, not the Yewmouth G.P.O. linesmen, so luckily they've all got passes, and I've fetched them over here for breakfast. The fire picket's out and Bob Ames'll be down in a minute to get it cracking. Don't worry, Titus. I expect Victor'll be all right. I've got sick-bay all laid on with hot baths and what-have-you."

The missing man's brother-in-law nodded gratefully; and at that moment, Sir Noel Osborne justified Merlin's estimation by appearing, fully dressed and struggling into an old raincoat he had picked up in the hall.

"I'll come as far as the Block with you," decided Titus. "Perhaps, if we spread out, we may find him ourselves on the way. I've brought my torch. Have you another you can lend Sir Noel?"

Merlin considered this swiftly. Noel and Titus had already been rubbing each other badly the wrong way the previous evening, and it might be wiser now, he thought, to keep them apart. On the other hand, he reflected, it might be wiser still to keep Titus away from Bob Ames, in Bob's present mood; at least until the search-party had been set in motion and Bob was busy.

He produced a torch for Noel, and handed it to him with a mute appeal to the physicist to behave himself. Noel's response to this was a very loud whisper as they set off, "I believe this is another of our friend's wolf-crying security games, Wiz my lad. Something tells me he's timing your every move with a stop-watch."

"I assure you I'm not, Sir Noel," Titus denied stiffly.

Noel's only acknowledgment was an impolite, "Well, it looks all very fishy to me." But he was helpful enough in examining the route as they went, and when they reached the Block he wasted no time in producing the keys and unlocking the guard chains and the door.

Merlin went in, turned on the light in the narrow entry-hall, and opened an interior door into the Block's Operations Room. He switched on the light in there too, and then stepped back with a choke of horror.

"Oh, God, Titus! Don't look in there," he stammered, sheet-white, as the wing commander's brother-in-law took a step towards him. "That's where Victor is. Something dreadful's happened."

CHAPTER THREE

A TWO-MINUTE WALK ACROSS WHITEHALL BROUGHT CHIEF Inspector William Baker and Sergeant Shonni Hughes, of the Scotland Yard Special Branch, to a reception desk inside the Air Ministry. There, Inspector Baker filled in a pink form requesting an interview with Air Marshal Sir Wenceslas Jones of DGW/97, and they were led by a uniformed messenger through a labyrinth of corridors.

One of the corridors was unexpectedly labelled "Home Office", but Inspector Baker was not disconcerted by this. He had had experience before of how the Home Office and the Air Ministry intertwined in their upper storeys, and he thought it unlikely, even if their guide had led them into the wrong Ministry, that they would be ushered before the wrong head of a department. There could hardly be two knights in Her Majesty's service with a name like Wenceslas Jones.

The man before whom the guide did, in fact, usher them might also have been labelled "Home Office"; for he was dressed in rough country tweeds, and was examining with deep satisfaction an astonishingly hairy, saddle-stitched-brimmed green hat. But he had those horizon-scanning blue eyes which betray the professional sailor or airman, in spite of his civilian clothes.

His greeting was reassuringly informal.

"Ah. De cops," said Air Marshal Sir Wenceslas Jones, glancing at the pink form. "Now we can go, I suppose." He waited until the messenger had gone, and then asked "You've been told all about the set-up down there? You know that officially you're not going to an R.A.F. station at all?"

They nodded.

"Know where it is?"

"No, sir. We were told we'd get all that from you."

"Right. Well, it's a place called St. Swithin's Island, just off the coast of Midsetshire. Belongs to the Earl of Yewmouth, really, but we're leasing it from him at the moment for some very secret, hush-hush experimental work."

He smiled with a trace of derision.

"So damned secret, in fact," he explained, "that we all do the best we can to pretend it isn't really there at all. You've got to do the same. The yarn we've spread about for the benefit of any curious Midset residents is that the Earl's leasing it to a group of university narks who want it for a long-term study of the breeding habits of herons. Know anything about the breeding habits of herons, Inspector?"

"No," said Inspector Baker, alarmed.

"Never mind. Neither do I. But I find it doesn't matter, if you take care not to get into conversation with anyone who looks learned enough to be a genuine ornithologist. You get by on bluff."

He turned his attention to the hairy hat again.

"Protective colouring," he explained it, fondly. "I bought it for fourteen-and-six four years ago, the first time I got tied up in this bird-watching business. I've worn it to St. Swithin's solidly ever since, rain and shine, and it's still as good as new. Not bad for fourteen-and-six. You ought to get one." He surveyed their discreet clothes with approval and said, "Still, you don't do too badly as you are. I was a bit afraid of over-the-eyes trilbies and belted grey raincoats and big feet. My experience with the C.I.D's limited to the chaps who come round when someone's been tinkering with the window-sashes."

He produced from an envelope four stiff little cards.

"Here you are. These are your passes. Both very secret indeed. Don't go losing them. Chief Inspector Baker and

Sergeant Hughes." He dealt them out, his voice lingering over the latter name.

"There was quite a spot of bother over Sergeant Hughes, Sergeant," he told the detective frankly. "In our own Service, we don't allow anyone under commissioned rank into this particular building, and we fought hard to get another inspector. It's as secret as that."

He looked at them to see if they were impressed. They were.

"You've got a good superintendent over you, Sergeant. I admired him, the way he bull-dozed us down. He told us if we couldn't trust our R.A.F. sergeants, that was all right by him, but a Metropolitan Police sergeant was a different matter. He claims you've already signed the Official Secrets Act and you're just as good as an inspector about keeping your mouth shut in pubs and buses. He's quite right, of course. I agreed with him. He's been a sergeant himself once, I gathered."

Sergeant Hughes met Inspector Baker's eye solemnly. This was rather a different version of the episode described explosively by their superintendent as "Damned red-tape—do they think the branch is stuffed full of inspectors sitting on their backsides doing nothing? I've heard that one before. Two inspectors out together in October, and in March down goes the establishment. No thank you. I wasn't buying that".

Inspector Baker looked at his two passes. One said "Ramswell B—Domestic Site only", and was serialised "141". The other said "Ramswell B—Ops Block" and was serialised "43".

"Those are temporary passes," said Sir Wenceslas Jones. "The ones we dish out to odd people not on the regular list. People like the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary," he continued casually. "And your number's what—43? So you can see we don't let everybody in. Not like the Zoo. It's quite an honour they're entrusting you with, Chief Inspector Baker and Sergeant Hughes."

He indicated the blank lines on the passes and told them

"Just fill in your signatures and your warrant-card numbers, will you, and we'll shove off. I'll tell you the rest of the story on the way."

There was a civilian car waiting in the Air Ministry car-park, which the Air Marshal obviously proposed to drive himself. He watched the detectives dubiously as they loaded their unwieldy apparatus into it. This included a set of police cameras with which Sergeant Hughes had apprehensively charged himself, in the knowledge that they would not be allowed the help of the Midset police photographer. Sir Wenceslas eyed the cameras even more dubiously, but all he said about them was, "If I were a heron and you pointed one of those at me, I'd start breeding all right. I'd probably lay a square egg." Then he climbed into the driver's seat, and took the car swiftly and expertly out of London, without further conversation except an occasional brief, self-congratulatory "Just made it", as he sped illegally through a series of amber traffic lights.

When they were out of the built-up area, he put his foot on the accelerator to an unalarming and competent sixty miles an hour.

"This St. Swithin's Island," he told them, "is one half of an experimental project we call the Uncle Tom Project. That's its code-name, by the way. You won't use these code-names off the island, or in front of the domestic staff there. There's another half, slightly larger and senior, at a place called Rams-well, on the mainland, and the project's concerned with the interception of inter-continental missiles. You know the things: stuff you can spark off in Moscow, belt a few hundred miles up into outer space and land down in New York. Or vice versa, of course."

Inspector Baker knew the things.

"Of course, we don't plan on chasing hundreds of miles into outer space to intercept them," Sir Wenceslas said, modestly. "We're not ambitious. We're quite satisfied if we can get hold

of them close in on the way down—say a hundred thousand feet up, or thereabouts. That's quite good enough to be going on with. The main thing is, to make sure you hit it some time before it's right on top of you.

"This particular scheme, the Uncle Tom Project, is one of a number of ideas being pursued around the problem, but to date I'd say it was the most promising. It's a nuisance, now it's rung the bell like this, that it ever got started on St. Swithin's Island at all. For choice, one prefers to have these things somewhere quiet, like the Hebrides or even the wilds of Australia. Still, there it is. It didn't look quite such a winner when it first started, and now, unless we want to move it lock, stock and barrel, we've got to put up with it where it is.

"The Project was originally the 'baby' of a Government physicist by the name of Osborne, way back in 1953. Osborne wasn't one of the official anti-rocket team. He was supposed to be merely on long-range radar generally. But he had this bright idea and put it forward. Unfortunately, there were several other bright ideas which looked rather better just then, so no one took a great deal of notice of Osborne, except Osborne himself. He was convinced from the start he'd hit the jackpot; so when he found no one wanted to give him vast tracts of northern Scotland to play with, he cast about and produced this much cheaper site at St. Swithin's instead.

"We won't go into how he made it work. You wouldn't understand me if I told you. It's all highly technical. But the basic idea is that you have an electronic computer—an electronic brain, the popular name is—tied in with something rather special in the way of radar. The radar picks up a few quick positions on the missile and the brain does the rest. Of course, you know, these computers work very rapidly and can sort out in a few seconds a host of data it would take a human mathematician months or even years to go through."

Inspector Baker nodded.

"Well, our brain predicts a localised region through which

the missile must pass, and then automatically sets a radio-monitor scanning around that region. If the missile's guided, the monitor picks up the guiding system and the brain sets off an answering missile to intercept, guiding it all the way there in response to the guiding of its target. If the missile's not guided, it's simply a matter of detecting whatever mechanical evasion it's taking, and anticipating it."

He smiled.

"It sounds all very simple, put like that. But it was quite a work of genius, putting it into practice."

Inspector Baker did not think it sounded in the least simple; and Sergeant Hughes whispered admiringly, "With a brain like that, you'd wonder why they call in Scotland Yard at all, wouldn't you?"

Sir Wenceslas heard him, and smiled more broadly.

"The reason Osborne picked St. Swithin's," he went on, "was because he knew it of old. We had it for the R.A.F. once before, during the war, when Coastal Command ran an Air/Sea Rescue Unit on it. That was more for the sake of not leaving it derelict for the Germans than anything else, but it was quite useful as well. Noel went there just before D-Day, in 1944, to set up a little radar-jammer against the Cherbourg peninsula. He was still there when Cherbourg fell and St. Swithin's was handed back to its owner, the Earl of Yewmouth, and he and old Yewmouth hit it off immediately. They're both as mad as hatters," diagnosed Sir Wenceslas, dispassionately. "Then, a few years later, Noel married one of Yewmouth's daughters, so you might almost say St. Swithin's is in his family now."

He suspended his explanations for a horrifying minute while he overtook a swaying double-decker bus and singed the paintwork of a motor-cycle combination coming simultaneously in the opposite direction.

"Did you see that chap? No crash-helmet. They oughtn't to be allowed on the road without them," he observed cen-

seriously. "They might kill themselves." Then he swerved placidly back to his near-side.

"Ramswell—the other part of the Project—is also an ex-wartime site, which Osborne opened up again and rigged up as his enemy missile-firer. Officially, Ramswell's supposed to be a meteorological station now, attached to the big fighter sector at Bishop Bradbury. But what it actually does is fire a group of dummy rockets—only miniatures, of course; we can't afford the real thing—at various sea targets set up beyond St. Swithin's. St. Swithin's has the electronic brain system, and has to do what it can to detect these rockets and intercept them in mid-air."

He pulled out a motoring map of the Midset coast area.

"Have a look at that. You'll find Ramswell marked with a red ring, and you can see that a straight line between there and St. Swithin's doesn't pass over anywhere very crowded. Luckily, it by-passes the town of Yewmouth by about five miles, which is safe; so that shots at the furthest sea-targets east of St. Swithin's shouldn't pass closer than two miles from Yewmouth. And, for the sea and air problem, they tie in to the local radar reporting system. They keep a fire control officer at the Sector at Bishop Bradbury, who can watch the movements of all ships and aircraft in the area, and order firing to stop if there's anything likely to be endangered."

"Yes, I see, sir."

"Then there's this other place, Turvey, the station that actually heard the shot fired last night. Turvey's a low-cover radar station, and when Osborne originally started his rocket duels between Ramswell and St. Swithin, it was Turvey he used to keep a check on the aircraft and ships. That's where they all got their code-names from," Sir Wenceslas explained. "Osborne re-connected an old sea-cable which had been put in so that the radar station could control the Air/Sea Rescue Unit in the war days, and he christened the Turvey end Topsy, needless to say. From there, St. Swithin's automatically

became Little Eva, and Ramswell, when it was ready to join in, was Uncle Tom. Later on, we split the sea-cable to Turvey, and sent one-half of it to terminate at Bishop Bradbury instead, but we keep the Turvey link open as well, as a double stand-by, and the code-names still stand.

"Victor Swanton, the man who's just been shot, was the first Service officer to be attached to the Project. He was one of our brighter young-executive types—poor devil, he was only thirty-three or so now. We moved him into Ramswell in the very early days, to keep a watching brief for the Service and, in due course of time, to take it over operationally when the boffins were ready to move on. We eventually took it over just over a year ago, when it became obvious Osborne and his boffins were here to stay and demanded something a bit roomier than an island half a mile long by half a mile wide.

"From the outset, Ramswell was the choice for the R.A.F. headquarters. It's always easier to administer things from the mainland than from an island, and Ramswell being an open and above-board R.A.F. station instead of a nest of heron-breeders made it easier, too. So, when the Project was handed to us operationally and Swanton became its first Commanding Officer, he made Ramswell his headquarters. But of course he was ultimately responsible for the St. Swithin's unit, too, and he used to be back and forth between the two quite a lot. He was on one of his visits to the island last night when he got shot."

He gave a short laugh.

"Naturally, our first reactions when we heard what had happened wasn't to worry about murders at all. That was a minor detail. Everyone's immediate thought, when his body was found right inside the Operations Room, was that he'd come stumbling in on some unsuspected piece of espionage, and had to pay for his discovery with his life. But we've had a tremendous stroke of luck there, and I think you can rule espionage out. Providentially, there's a Naval exercise in

those waters this week, and the Navy had the area under radar and asdic survey all night. They're able to assure us there wasn't a vessel anywhere near St. Swithin's until our own telephone men went out from Bishop Bradbury to see why no one was answering the telephones. So there couldn't have been an outsider on the island and off again, and we're fairly satisfied none of our own lads'd be mixed up in anything of that sort."

He gave a sidelong grin at Sergeant Hughes.

"You can guess," he said, "that if we're all that particular about what visitors we let in, we do tend to be a little bit choosy about the types we select as residents. Every officer and airman—even the elsan-emptier—gets a very severe screening before he's accepted for the Project at all; and once they're in, they all watch each other like hawks, particularly the Operations staff. It's a most security-conscious affair, and I'm sure if there'd been anything like internal espionage going on, we'd have got wind of it long before anyone got as far as being interrupted red-handed on the job."

His cheerfulness faded.

"Besides," he ended gravely, "right from the start, I knew we wouldn't really have to look round for espionage to get a reasonable explanation of this particular vendetta. It's less than a fortnight ago I had occasion to warn Swanton myself that if he didn't let up a bit on the way he was riding the St. Swithin's group, we'd find him dead in a ditch one fine morning."

CHAPTER FOUR

SIR WENCESLAS RELIEVED HIS TROUBLED FEELINGS BY PUTTING his foot on the accelerator and taking the next few hamlets at seventy instead of sixty. Then a built-up area sign made him safe to converse with again.

"Why did you have to give him a warning like that, sir?" asked Inspector Baker.

The Air Marshal sighed.

"Well, this is only my personal opinion, remember, so don't quote me. But I'll tell you this, just to put you in the picture. Victor Swanton was a quite excellent commander for our Uncle Tom Project. Since the Service took it over from the Ministry of Supply, we've never had one major trouble with its organisation at Air Ministry level. That's extremely unusual for a new venture that's still too secret to be able to throw its priorities around very freely."

His faraway blue eyes narrowed.

"That means that Swanton had the makings of a pretty good administrator in him. He must have been making his presence felt hard in more than a few Air Ministry Directorates, without having to come yowling to me and my air commodore to back him up every five minutes. But you don't achieve that sort of thing at wing commander level unless you're to a certain extent—to put it bluntly—a bit of a bastard. And if Swanton was making his presence felt by the Directorates above him, I expect he made it felt even harder by the chaps underneath him, at Ramswell and St. Swithin's."

He looked wise.

"It's not altogether a bad thing, that touch of the bastard, if you don't carry it too far. It makes men respect you. Oddly enough, it makes most of them admire you, too, and in a queer sort of way it commands a lot of loyalty. My impression of the Uncle Tom side, the crowd at Ramswell, was that he'd got a very enviable personal sway there. But St. Swithin's—the Little Eva group—I've been a good bit less happy about lately. I had a feeling Swanton was beginning to make a bit of a Devil's Island out of St. Swithin's. You know—the good boys here at Ramswell, and the bad boys over the water.'

"Of course, there's no doubt St. Swithin's *would* need a little heavier hand at times. They're a friskier set than the Ramswell group, by the very nature of the set-up. The island's not cut off from civilisation by any means; it's only fifteen miles from the mainland and the boys get to and fro to Yewmouth quite easily in their little launches. But going ashore off an island, I suppose you can't avoid feeling a bit like a dog let off the lead, and we hadn't picked the most inhibited set of characters for St. Swithin's in the first place."

He smiled.

"This heron-breeding caper has its restrictive side. It means the Little Eva job's not the ideal posting for a family man. There's no room on the island for married quarters, and we're not keen on importing wives and families into hirings in Yewmouth, because you know how these good ladies will talk in cafés, and we'd have the bird-fancying smokescreen blown apart in no time. So for St. Swithin's, we pick out the happy bachelors, and before we select them we ask them to volunteer not to marry for a period of three years. If they can't do that, we don't take them. But you can see what we get, as a result?"

He laughed.

"The sort of young fellow who's prepared to volunteer things like that without even knowing why he's volunteering isn't likely to be the earnest, steady-going youngster who wants to settle down young and be no trouble to anybody. The St.

Swithin's group would be a fairly effervescent collection wherever they were, and all being cooped up together on the island like this—well, it doesn't make life easy for anyone trying to run them from outside. On the whole, they don't always take too kindly to the Ramswell overlordship. The focal point of their loyalties is more immediately to their own sub-commander, Swanton's next-in-command in the Project, Squadron Leader Merlin."

"And Swanton wasn't in favour of that?"

Sir Wenceslas shook his head.

"Swanton, I ought to tell you, like most of these staff course successes, was an extremely ambitious man. Quite justifiably—he'd have had a great future before him, if this hadn't happened. But that made his attitude very much monarch-of-all-he-surveyed. He was going to be the big noise in the Uncle Tom Project, and he didn't propose to put up with any opposition. If he could have done it, he'd have liked to run everything himself. But, of course, he couldn't. There was too much to do."

They reached the de-restricted area and the car purred forward.

"Humanly, I suppose a little heartburning was inevitable. Ramswell was undoubtedly the better choice for the administrative centre, and Swanton was kept pretty busy, running the general tactics of these sea-target rocket duels, and in addition whistling up and down between Ramswell and London sitting on air defence committees and fighting the financial wizards to get his group all the equipment it needed, and so forth. He couldn't cope with the close control of the island unit as well. So, in spite of himself, he was forced more and more to delegate that to Squadron Leader Merlin, and that was a bit of a tragedy. You see, operationally the object of the whole Project was much more to learn about intercepting these rockets than about how to fire them off at the sea-targets. And that meant poor Swanton was having to

stand by and watch the more momentous side of the business pass right out of his own hands, into his underling's."

"And as a result," asked the inspector, "he took it out on the underling?"

The Air Marshal nodded.

"Yes. The trouble was, Merlin's a little too capable a deputy for a commander like that. He's no risk from the point of view of the administrator. He's one of those slaphappy youngsters who's a shade hazy on the right shape of flag to fly when the Inspector-General happens round to check that the fire-buckets are properly whitewashed. But get Merlin inside his Operations Block, and he's streets and streets ahead of anyone at Rams-well. Looked at purely in the light of someone getting paid for firing one rocket at another and hitting it, Swanton couldn't hold a candle to him. Merlin's quite definitely the Project's star controller, and Swanton had a bad case of professional jealousy over that."

He looked meditative.

"Mind you, one sees Swanton's side of it. Merlin was Swanton's own protégé, and it was Swanton who fetched him into the Project in the first place. That was three years ago, soon after Swanton joined himself and found he needed a liaison officer to help him cope with the more technical side. Swanton himself was originally a fighter controller—the man who directs the course of a battle in the air from the picture he sees on a radar on the ground," he explained. "But Merlin belongs to the technical branch. His job isn't operational, in that sense, at all. It's technical. He's supposed to see that these things like radar sets function properly, so that the controller can use the information off them. Like the difference between a radio announcer and a radio engineer."

Inspector Baker nodded.

"Well, all this Uncle Tom and Little Eva gear's extremely highly technical; and Swanton very soon found the need of a technician to advise him, if he were to keep himself properly

abreast of it. And Merlin was a personal friend of his. They'd known each other at home since boyhood, and Merlin had served under Swanton on radar stations at home and in Germany, before Swanton started his giddy career of staff courses. So Swanton asked specially for Merlin, and when Merlin arrived—then a very junior officer indeed—he was duly grateful for the sparkling opportunities thus given him. I think that's how it was supposed to go on.

"But it didn't pan out like that. You see, this Uncle Tom technique of ours is something quite different from the old orthodox fighter-control system, and inside the Operations Block, Squadron Leader Swanton, as he was then, and Flying Officer Merlin were both starting from scratch. If anything, Merlin even had a slight edge over it, because being a technician he at least understood what was making the electronic brain tick, and had a basic idea of what could be got out of it. He had a university training in mathematics, which helped a lot, and he had the third great advantage that he was there all the time; not flying about the country fighting the Treasury about how many signal generators they could have, and helping defence committees forecast how many controllers would be needed in ten years' time for new stations no one's even started building yet."

He shrugged.

"So there it was. There was Swanton, proficient if not spectacular on the operational side, but getting more and more out of the swim as he fell up to his eyes in all the administrative things; and there was Merlin, slamming happily about on St. Swithin's, sending in weekly administrative returns to Ramswell which Swanton could hardly read, because Merlin's spelling's about as experimental as his operational technique; and at the same time sending brilliant, if equally illiterate, research reports to the Air Ministry about all the new interception systems he was evolving while Swanton was counting the signal generators.

"And, of course, it's the operational reports that stick in the minds of the people who matter; and Swanton, as I've told you, was on the ambitious side. He wasn't the sort of man to relish anyone coming up too close behind him. People who tread on the heels of types like that must expect an occasional kick in the stomach, and I'm afraid that's what young Merlin and his myrmidons have been coming in for, rather a lot lately."

"In what form?"

"Oh, nothing concrete. But if anyone at high level started handing bouquets about St. Swithin's, Swanton was always a little more candid about its defects than a loyal commanding officer ought to be; and, except in the restraining presence of their juniors he was undoubtedly on the meticulous side over keeping Merlin in his place as the junior partner. Merlin is a cheerful enthusiast by nature, and quite ready to be friendly with any visiting Prime Minister who takes an intelligent interest in Little Eva. But Swanton had a nasty, smooth-tongued way of reining him up in mid-gallop that I wouldn't have stood for indefinitely, if I'd been Merlin. It wasn't confined to the Operations Block, either. I've seen Merlin bathed in sweat over a sociable cup of tea in Swanton's own sitting-room, frightened even to talk about the weather to Mrs. Swanton in case he expressed an opinion Swanton'd give him his come-uppance on."

Inspector Baker looked at him curiously.

"Are you suggesting, sir, that Squadron Leader Merlin's movements last night might repay investigation?"

Sir Wenceslas's heavy-jowled face, even in repose not unlike a good-natured bulldog's, wrinkled deeply.

"Well, let's get ourselves quite clear on this. I shouldn't like to leave you with any idea I'm casting suspicion exclusively at Merlin. I'm not. When I said I wouldn't have stood for it indefinitely, that doesn't mean Merlin wouldn't. He's a very patient and easy-going fellow, and considerably more long-suffering than I ever was at his age—than I am now, for that

matter, and if it turns out he's had anything to do with this, I'll be rather surprised. But there are other men on St. Swithin's, too, who must have come in for a fair amount of the backwash. Swanton had far too good a sense of his own dignity to indulge in too much person-to-person mud-slinging at Merlin. He kept his axe well sharpened for the whole of Merlin's little kingdom, and they may not all be long-suffering. There were four others, as well as Merlin, on the island last night, and it could equally well be any one of them. We do know this much: Swanton had deliberately come over to make trouble for one of the St. Swithin's officers. But, unfortunately, we don't know which one." "

"How do you know that much, sir?"

"Swanton said so himself. He telephoned Merlin at lunch-time to announce he was coming over to spend the night and next day there, and, as it was some time since he'd been, Merlin simply assumed it was a routine visit. But my own belief is that one afternoon's notice is a little on the abrupt side for a routine visit, and more probably there was something specific which had cropped up to bring him over.

"Anyway, whatever it was, he didn't broach it that night. He had a very rough journey to the island, and told Merlin, who met him at the landing-stage, that he wasn't going to start work that evening. He had a load of secret correspondence to file away in the secret safe in the Operations Block. but he wouldn't inspect the Block itself until next day, or tackle any administrative inspections either.

"It was the purest stroke of bad fortune they didn't take those documents over there and then. But the boat didn't get in until after seven, and, as they were collecting the Operations Block keys from the duty officer in the Mess, dinner was announced. So the documents were temporarily locked in the administrative safe instead, while they had the meal.

"Well, you know how these things go. Merlin—or so Merlin claimed this morning—was anxious to get them safely put

away as soon as dinner was over, and made several attempts to persuade Swanton to get up and do so. But Swanton"—the Air Marshal smiled briefly—"probably didn't feel like turning straight out into the pouring rain again, so he hung on, hoping the weather would lift. There was a play on the television he wanted to see, and afterwards, when the television closed down, there was a general sociable session of talking and drinking. Merlin hung on until nearly midnight, still wanting to get Swanton out to the Block with the documents. But then, as the conversation had developed into a political argument and didn't show any sign of breaking up, and Merlin himself wasn't feeling too fit, he deputed the duty officer to look after Swanton and the documents whenever Swanton was ready, and went off to bed.

"The rest of them all stayed on with the wing commander. From all I can gather, the party was an entirely affable one—there wasn't any hint of trouble between Swanton and any of his subordinates, and the argument, in spite of being political, was a good-tempered one. At one o'clock, Swanton eventually did rouse himself to do something about these documents, and mentioned in front of everyone in the room that he still had to take them over to the Block. The duty officer, of course, offered to take them for him. But Swanton was feeling benevolent, and he told him he needn't bother. They were documents, I gather, Swanton preferred to lock away by his own hand. But unfortunately, he didn't even take the duty officer over with him, in attendance. He told them all it was too foul a night to drag more people out than was necessary—and off he went, all by himself, while everyone else went up to bed and stayed there. Or so they all claim this morning," he grunted.

Inspector Baker grimaced.

"That's going to be a difficult one to prove or disprove."

"Yes, it won't be easy. Well, that was at ten past one, and all Swanton had to do was get the documents out of the

administrative safe, walk across to the Block, which would take him about five minutes, lock them away and then come back again. Unluckily, it was a dark and dirty night and no one saw whether he actually did set off alone, and if so at what time. But the murder, as we know, didn't happen until four minutes to two. So, in the interval, someone must have collared him for a fairly long chat over something, either over in the Block, or back in the Mess before he left."

His eyes narrowed.

"And, in spite of all the sociability in the evening," he added, "there's no doubt this mysterious someone must have had something very urgent to chat about. And knew it, too. It must have been a most uncomfortable convivial evening for one of the St. Swithin's boys.

"You see, when the boat got back to the island, it had had a good tossing-around, and in consequence got in rather late. So, when Swanton appeared at the dinner table, one of the St. Swithin's officers, in a polite and host-like way, said how relieved they all were to see him safe and sound, and added something fatuous about 'We were beginning to be afraid you'd been sunk without trace'. And Swanton, in that smooth-tongued way I've been telling you about, looked genially round the table and gave everyone a splendid appetite for dinner by saying, 'Afraid? That makes me feel rather guilty. Before I leave St. Swithin's again tomorrow, *I'm* afraid there'll be at least one of you wishing with all his heart I *had* been sunk on the way over.'"

CHAPTER FIVE

THERE WERE TWO FIGURES WAITING FOR THEM AS THEY reached the island.

"This part's a bit tricky," Sir Wenceslas told the detectives, as the boat manoeuvred gingerly at the little landing-stage, "because it doesn't do to run ashore at the wrong spot. It means a long paddle round the shingle edge, and you get your feet wet. We've got most of the coastline mined, you see. We can't have picnic-parties coming ashore to see how the baby herons are getting on, and people take so little notice of 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' boards nowadays. So we faked up a nice explosion, and made a fuss in the local paper about a mine left over from the war. And now we've got a net fence most of the way round, with 'Danger—Mines' notices. But don't go swarming over the fences thinking the notices are all part of the spoof. They're not. We've put the wartime minefield back *in toto*."

"Are we likely to run ashore in the wrong spot?" asked Inspector Baker, alarmed.

"I shouldn't think so," replied the Air Marshal cheerfully. "But you never know. They haven't a great deal of space to play with. It's the landing-stage and a few yards each side of it—or else! It makes a nice narrow strip to defend, if anything nastier than picnic-parties tries forcing a way in. No, we're all right. We're going to make it. No paddling round the edges today."

He looked towards the shore.

"That's Merlin, the big fellow nearer to the jetty. The older chap with him's Maltby-Oates, our security king who'll be

collaborating on the job with you. Not very nice for him, poor devil—he's married to Swanton's only sister and I imagine she's going to be pretty cut up about this."

He hesitated, and then added in a disarming burst of candour, "I perhaps ought to warn you, Inspector, not to pin too many high hopes on the help you'll get out of Titus Oates. He's an awfully nice chap and very painstaking, but he isn't a pukka intelligence nark, you know. His real job's the Project's chief administrative officer, but he's the Project security officer as a side-line as well. To be truthful, what we wanted was just someone to keep a fatherly eye on the boys' social contacts, and Swanton thought it'd be a nice quiet number for his brother-in-law until he tipped over retiring age."

He cocked a dubious eye on Titus.

"You'll keep what I'm saying in confidence, won't you? Don't pass it on to Oates in a fit of exasperation that you're not really in need of his expert advice, because I don't think, he sees his job the same way we do. He thinks he does a vital and efficient job on the security side, and it couldn't get on without him. He's quite right, too, in the normal run of things. But he may not appreciate the difference between giving little pep-talks to the controllers about not accepting drinks from strangers, and the larger problems involved in tracking a murderer. So if you find him trying to teach you your job, or in any other ways making a B.F. of himself, bear with him as much as you can."

His voice was light, but its undertones were serious.

"That also goes," he appealed, "for any similar stupidities which may irritate you in Squadron Leader Merlin—and in Air Marshal Jones. We're not used to this sort of thing, and we'll probably get under your feet a good deal. But don't show us up in public more than you can help. After this is over, we've got to go ahead with our Project, and we don't want to have to make a wholesale change of personnel because the present lot have lost all respect for their superiors."

Humility of this order commanded a certain respect of its own.

"We'll be all right, sir," promised Inspector Baker. "If we find ourselves losing patience, we'll say nothing until we've counted the number of rockets that'd land on all these sea-targets if Sergeant Hughes and I were operating your Little Eva."

"That's diplomatic," smiled Sir Wenceslas. Then he changed to compassionate solemnity as they came ashore and the two squadron leaders approached.

Merlin thrust a large hand towards Sir Wenceslas, in an awkward cross between a civilian greeting and the vestigial remains of a Service salute. His square, sea-tanned face was also very solemn, an expression which sat most unreadily on it. Inspector Baker judged that the island sub-commander was not much accustomed to taking life solemnly.

"I'm more sorry than I can say, sir," he apologised to Sir Wenceslas, "that this should have happened on St. Swithin's. I'd have done anything in the world to prevent it."

This detached, vice-regal way of regarding the murder of a boyhood friend struck Inspector Baker as startling. It had the same effect, he saw, on Sergeant Hughes, who gave the sub-commander a swift, odd look. Merlin caught the look, coloured painfully and passed his tongue across his lips.

"It can't be helped, Merlin. There's no way of ruling against things like this," said Sir Wenceslas; then, shaking hands with the older man, he offered uncomfortably, "Titus, I'm so sorry about it. There's no need for you to go on dealing with it personally, you know, if you'd rather not."

"No, sir, I'd rather," There was obviously nothing detached in Titus Oates's attitude. Tears stood in his eyes as he went on, "My wife will wish me to, I know. She hasn't heard yet, and I can't think how I'm going to tell her. Her mother died when Victor was born, and she practically brought him up you know, sir. And Victor's poor father—he's nearly eighty

—I daren't think what it'll do to him. I hardly know how I'm going to go home."

Merlin laid a heavy, commiserating hand on his colleague's shoulder, and Titus pulled himself together.

"We haven't let the news off the island at all yet, sir, except to you yourself," Merlin told Sir Wenceslas. "I haven't informed anyone at Ramswell, or Victor's home, and we haven't reported the death to the civilian coroner at Yewmouth, as I believe we have to."

"Oh, him! Yes." Sir Wenceslas looked harassed. "Inspector, you must give us your expert guidance on handling the Yewmouth coroner. If there's to be an inquest, it'll have to be in camera. We can't have him calling up a jury of interested citizens and a boxload of newspaper reporters to dig into all our secrets."

"We can arrange for it in camera, if national security's involved."

"That's good. Well then, Merlin, if you'll get one or two of your myrmidons to take our bags up to the house," proposed Sir Wenceslas, "perhaps we'd better go straight over and have a look at things in the block, unless you've any better ideas?"

"The house?" asked Sergeant Hughes, brightening.

Sir Wenceslas grinned.

"Certainly, the house. This is a highly civilised island. What did you expect—a row of tents?"

"I thought I saw a Nissen hut lurking about by the landing-stage."

"Yes, you did. There are those as well. They're a legacy from the Air/Sea Rescue days, but they're only the offices and stores. Off duty, everyone lives like lords and gentlemen in a fine old eighteenth-century manor house. It's not ours, I need hardly tell you. It belongs to the Earl of Yewmouth, so you mustn't damage it, or write anything rude on the walls. But apart from that, you may treat it as home. It offers all the amenities of the twentieth century too, from drains to television:"

He turned to the island sub-commander.

"Are we ready, Merlin? Right, you lead the way. And cheer up, Sergeant," he encouraged Sergeant Hughes, who was picking up his photographic gear with gingerly inexperience. "Don't be quite so frightened of those cameras. There's no danger of an explosion."

A sudden convulsion from Titus Oates almost proved him wrong. The chief administrative officer had been growing steadily more shocked since Sir Wenceslas's breezy reference to rude writings on walls, and now he looked thunderstruck. As Merlin set off, Titus touched Sir Wenceslas respectfully on the sleeve, and drew him back a few paces with heavy unobtrusiveness.

"Sergeant?" he queried in a clear whisper.

"Yes, Titus, sergeant. Not to get into a tizzy about that," Sir Wenceslas beseeched him, not unsympathetically. "We had a pitched battle with Scotland Yard over it this morning. We lost, and it's all settled now. Police sergeants aren't on the same footing as the Service, you must remember. It's just a rank everyone has to go through on the way to inspector and Commissioner of Police. Isn't it, Sergeant?"—he called for confirmation to Sergeant Hughes, to the great embarrassment of the well-intentioned Titus.

"That's what they tell you when you join, sir," agreed Sergeant Hughes equably.

Titus looked far from convinced.

"And cameras!" He was a stolid man, not given to gesturing, but his voice was wringing its hands. "Private cameras aren't allowed on the island at all, sir. Are these men proposing to actually take one inside the Operations Block itself and take photographs?"

"We must have a record to refer to," Inspector Baker explained. "The position of the body; how it fell; any footprints or fingerprints near it; anything like that may be significant, and they're not things you can carry in your mind's eye."

"You'll have to, this time," ruled Titus uncompromisingly. "You can't go scattering photographs of this body all round Scotland Yard—perhaps all round the Old Bailey, too," he enlarged in horror. "It's lying right across an operations table. If a photograph of the chart underneath it got into the wrong hands, it could do untold damage."

"Cheer up. They're not properly trained photographers, so perhaps none of their shots'll come out," said Sir Wenceslas optimistically. "But seriously, Titus, you may be quite sure anything remotely confidential will be blacked out long before it gets anywhere like the Old Bailey. At the moment, I see no need to allow any prints to go off the island at all. I take it that everything necessary in the way of developing and printing can be done in your Little Eva dark-room, can't it, Merlin?"

"Yes, sir. We can handle all that," Merlin's anxious gravity was momentarily dispersed by a wide, carefree smile which made him look like a friendly schoolboy. "We can take the pictures for you as well, if you're really in doubt how a camera works," he offered to Sergeant Hughes, co-operatively. "We're dab hands at photography in this racket. It's part of the job. I'll be happy to give you all the help I can of that sort. Oh—there's just one point first."

His smile faded, and he turned round to look Inspector Baker full in the face. The inspector had the impression that this was not done without an effort, and caught an indefinably luminous look about Merlin's very wide-open grey eyes which he recognised as a familiar symptom of fear.

"I'd better tell you this, as a formality, Inspector," Merlin said. "I'm afraid you've got a very restricted list of people to investigate. I'm sorry I have to say this, sir," he added to Sir Wenceslas, "but I can't think this was anyone but one of my operations officers. For one thing, the pistol that's lying beside the body is our own Operations Block defence weapon, and there are other indications of inside knowledge too. And

there are only five operations officers on the island altogether, at the moment," he told the inspector, "one of whom is myself. If, in those circumstances, you feel you can't trust us to help you or collaborate with you individually, I'll fully understand that; and if you'd like me to send for a colleague to double-check anything I tell you or do for you, I'll do so. I'd like to say this, if I may: I didn't have anything to do with this, and I don't know who did. But I appreciate I can't expect you to take my unsupported word for that, and I realise you'll have to take precautions."

"I'll take your word for it, if you give it me, Wiz," announced Sir Wenceslas Jones with great deliberation.

Inspector Baker considered him admiringly. This struck the detective as an extremely rash and ill-considered attitude to adopt before hearing any of the facts, and his opinion of Sir Wenceslas as a partner in detection went down by a large number of points. These points, he transferred approvingly to his opinion of the Air Marshal as a departmental head, and a loyal human being.

He glanced thoughtfully at the island sub-commander, and hoped Sir Wenceslas's faith was not due for a painful betrayal.

Merlin had resumed his path to the Operations Block, and was now walking with his back to the rest of the party. But he had not turned away quite quickly enough to hide an uncomfortable recoiling at his Air Marshal's trusting words, as if he found them less a support than a most unwelcome hit below the belt.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PATH FROM THE LANDING-STAGE TO THE OPERATIONS Block lay through some neglected and overgrown remains of what was still recognisable as fine landscape gardening. They were moving inshore, along a slightly uphill path through a small plantation. After a few 'minutes' walk, they emerged into a clearing.

The detectives now found themselves at one end of a long terraced lawn, at the other end of which stood the little manor house of which the Air Marshal had spoken. At their own end was a miniature lake, in the centre of which was a marble fountain in the guise of a piping shepherd-boy. Two moorhens on the lake-edge looked at the Scotland Yard men resentfully, and scuttered across the water as if they shared Titus Oates's opinions about 'the suitability of Sergeant Hughes for the assignment.

Inspector Baker saw a tiered mound of greenery and rockery rising beyond the lake, topped by a construction so charming that it evoked from him a spontaneous "That's pretty".

"That," said Sir Wenceslas, with the pride of an unpaid guide, "is the Operations Block."

The detectives stared at it. The Operations Block was a delightful, octagonal building obviously contemporary with the eighteenth-century house, and built in weathered brick just visible through a mantle of green creeper. It was about twenty feet high, and had a sun-bonnet roof of twig thatching, through which poked a squat, four-faced clock tower. As the party approached, the clock inside whirled gently and creakled into

a liquid, musical-box version of "The World Turned Upside Down". Then it gave what sounded like an apologetic cough, whirled again and industriously struck five o'clock.

"It's a Georgian Folly," explained Merlin. "A sort of summer-house with knobs on. I'm afraid it's not quite so picturesque inside, because the vandals of Little Eva have partitioned it all up with ghastly asbestos walls, but we keep the outside pretty much as it always was. It'd be a shame to do otherwise when we don't need to, and anyway it all goes to make good heron-breeding atmosphere."

He looked up at the clock, checked his own watch and altered the watch by fifteen seconds.

"That's a twenty-four hour clock," he told the detectives. "Two centuries old, but it's awfully reliable. It's got a different tune for every hour it strikes, night and day, and we've got all twenty-four tunes playing now, for the first time since before the 1914 war. Noel Osborne, our head boffin, put the striking mechanism back on the air the same time he installed Little Eva."

"Not such a vandal as all that, then," commented Inspector Baker with a smile. "You could set that service off against the asbestos partitions."

Merlin smiled back, his disarmingly innocent and youthful smile.

"It's not really un vandalism," he said profoundly. "They're very much like that, the top boffins. They're not fussy what sort of old junk they get to house their equipment—a golden casket or an old tea-chest's all one to them, as long as it doesn't let the rain in. But if it's a question of something mechanical that ought to be working and isn't—well, that's an offence against nature, not art, so it has to be remedied."

He drew from the pocket of his leather-patched jacket a bunch of keys and began to unlock the guard chains across the door. Sir Wenceslas, seeing Inspector Baker's raised eyebrows at this haphazard form of defence, explained, "We usually

throw a nine-foot steel fence round places like this, and mount sentries. But we couldn't do that here without giving the whole game away. The Folly clock's used a good deal by local yachtsmen in the racing season, and they might start to think a bit if they trained their binoculars on a lot of nine-foot steel palings."

The Folly windows were barred and shuttered and the place was in darkness as Merlin ushered them in. He closed the outer door meticulously, turned on a light and then led them through an inner door labelled Operations Room. Here, he opened the shutters and two windows on one side of the room, and a little daylight filtered ungenerously round the backs of a row of electronic receivers.

Inspector Baker and Sergeant Hughes peered at these tentacles of the Little Eva brain with goggle-eyed respect, but they were unable to gain much from their inspection. The two security-conscious squadron leaders had draped all five receivers in shrouds of grey, unrevealing Service bed blankets, and, as he saw the detectives' interest, Titus Oates pushed gently past them and twitched the nearest shroud even more mysteriously into nebulousness, like an anxious mother adjusting a young daughter's over-short skirt.

"The body's over there," he said reproachfully, directing their attention to the other side of the room.

They looked. This side was less severely blanketed, but a series of charts and electronic indicators had been discreetly covered. Sergeant Hughes mentally counted the total number of blankets, and wondered sympathetically whether all the domestic airmen Merlin had just acquitted would be warm enough in bed that October night.

The Operations table itself was not shrouded. About four feet square, it jutted out into the middle of the room, its perspex top covering a bewildering mass of superimposed cartography, curves and grids.

On top of the perspex, exactly as he had fallen at the shot, sprawled the body of Wing Commander Swanton.

Swanton must have looked in life, Inspector Baker decided, very much the "brighter young-executive type" Sir Wenceslas had described him. The body, in hard physical condition but obviously accustomed to the luxuries of good nourishment and grooming, was clad in a dark, quiet suit, well-cut but not too smart for the country life the wing commander had been leading. The grey tie with it would have been pleasant but for the effects of the close-range pistol shot, and the dead man had not been guilty of the economy of wearing a Service blue shirt with his civilian suit.

One hand was still gripping the hand-telephone over which he had been speaking when he was shot. The other held in the clutch of death a bunch of keys, duplicate of the set with which Merlin had opened the Block. There was a Service revolver, a Smith & Wesson .38, lying near the dangling feet.

"That's exactly as we found him this morning," stammered Merlin, his eyes averted from the pitiful head. "We haven't touched him at all—or the pistol."

Inspector Baker looked down at the highly-polished linoleum on the floor.

"You've been pretty close," he observed, censoriously.

Merlin looked down at his own large, unmistakable footprints in apology.

"Yes, I'm afraid there was no help for that. You see, the immediate essential, when we saw what had happened in here, was to get the island back in touch with the mainland as quickly as possible. That was even more important than preserving evidence. We didn't know then what might have been happening. It might have been a flat-out attack on the whole Project, or some large-scale sabotage effort, and our administrative line to P.B.X. was out of order. So I had to see whether the operational lines were down too, and they terminate at the Operations table control desk."

He crossed the room, leaving yet another trail of his obliterating prints, and pointed out a row of telephone keys along

the top of the little control desk where the wing commander had been perched when he was shot.

"Our lines to Turvey and Bishop Bradbury come in here. As it happened, they hadn't been interfered with at all, but I couldn't know that without testing. But I didn't disturb the body in the least. I just unplugged the telephone hand-set he was holding, and plugged in another in its place."

He glanced for instruction to Sir Wenceslas.

"May I discuss the communications network, sir?"

The Air Marshal nodded.

"Well," Merlin explained to the detective, "the line over which Swanton was trying to raise help is one of our two operational lines, to a station called Turvey. We're top-secret, so Turvey doesn't know anything about us, beyond that we've got that one line. So there'd be no chance of Turvey raising any direct alarm. The best she could do was what she did do—report the trouble to Sector, at Bishop Bradbury.

"Bishop Bradbury's got an operational line to us too, but that doesn't go any further than the Operations Room, so no alarm could be raised over that. But we've one more link with the mainland—our administrative line to the Yewmouth Public Exchange. That goes right through to the domestic site, and that was the danger for the murderer. He'd know that if Bishop Bradbury was really alarmed, that'd be the line they'd ring through on—and, if they did, he'd be trapped before he'd had time to clear up after himself. If the domestic site were warned, the guard'd be over at the Block in less than ten minutes.

"So he intercepted that line, as it came through the Operations Room from the master switch-rack, and cut it off. Come over here."

He led them to the wall behind the shrouded Little Eva receivers, and pointed out a maze of electronic wiring running through an exit hole high up near the ceiling.

"That's where all our feeders and telephone cables are led

in and out of the building," he said, "and, at that point, they can all be broken, for re-routing and routine maintenance. The murder couldn't get at the switch-rack itself to make the disconnection, because the switch-room door was locked, and Swanton had the keys fast in his hand. But it's quite simple to do the disconnection here—if you know which line to select. You just undo a small screw-clasp, and pull the cable apart. But you can see how many lines there are up there, can't you? No outsider, unless he were a highly-trained espionage agent, could possibly have guessed which one to cut off."

Inspector Baker peered at the tangle of wires.

"Which is the disconnected one?"

"It's not disconnected now. I re-connected it." Merlin blanched under an even more censorious stare, and defended himself, "Well, I'd really no choice. He'd cut off the main lead between P.B.X. and the Block, and that left me without one working telephone between the Block and the domestic site. I couldn't leave it like that, not when we didn't even know it wasn't sabotage. I might have needed the guard-room in a hurry."

This was reasonable enough, and Inspector Baker conceded it.

"But it wasn't a trained outside espionage man," Merlin concluded. "Look at this."

He produced for their inspection a stiff-backed log-book labelled "Operations Block Diary".

"This," he explained, "is the record book of all visits made to the Block. Each time the Block is entered, the time of entry is logged in here, together with the purpose of the visit—and the names of the people in the party. This was how we found the book this morning."

He opened it, to display a ragged tear where a page had been removed.

"Someone had got his name logged in there, alongside Swanton's," he said. "And it wouldn't be a stranger, would it?"

Inspector Baker considered him.

"Very well. I'll have to take notice of what you say. Are you the only Operations officer who's been in the building since the murder?"

Merlin nodded.

"And we're going to find traces of you on that cable screw-clasp as a result of work done *after* the murder." His eyes narrowed. "And in the vicinity of the body, from when you were testing your operational lines. Is there anywhere else we must expect traces like that, Squadron Leader Merlin, before we start looking into what other marks there are? I should like as thorough a list as you can give me, please."

Merlin looked extremely dismayed.

"Well—yes, Inspector—pretty well everywhere." He turned in appeal to Titus Oates. "I couldn't help it, Titus, could I? I only did what was absolutely essential."

"It's unfortunate we've had to make free with a lot of things which would've been better left untouched until you arrived," the security squadron leader supported him, apologetically, "but you can see how we were placed? Anti-sabotage and anti-espionage measures had to take precedence. We had to check all the secret stores and documents to make sure nothing was missing, which meant handling a lot of items which might have helped you. But I don't believe you'll have lost very much by it, Inspector. The murderer had plenty of time to tidy up after himself, and I imagine he won't have left us very many traces. And, of course, I *did* bear the detection requirements in mind as far as I could. I've done what I can to preserve things for you."

A kindly balm of complacency momentarily soothed his grief.

"There's this question of footprints on the floors," he said keenly. "I admit now this floor looks a horrifying jumble, but there's no harm done there. The original state of the floor was one of the first things I noticed, and I caused Sir Noel and Squadron Leader Merlin to confirm my observations. Before

Merlin walked on it, there wasn't a mark on it whatsoever. It was absolutely clear."

He paused impressively.

"That's extremely significant," he instructed the C.I.D. men, "because it oughtn't to have been. It was a nasty, wet night and it's a highly-polished surface. Both Wing Commander Swanton's footmarks, and his assailant's, ought to have been all over the place."

He waited to make sure Inspector Baker was following this and Inspector Baker agreed, "Yes", obediently.

"Yes," repeated Titus in chorus-concurrence with himself. "And there should have been marks in the Operations office, too. That's the little room to the right of the outer door, as you come in. The wing commander had been in there, for we found his raincoat hanging behind the door, and that's where the Operations Block Diary's kept as well. And his dispatch-case with the secret documents was there too. And you see that pistol?"

He pointed to the Smith & Wesson.

"That comes from the Operations office, too. It's an emergency defence weapon. So the murderer must have been in the office, to get hold of that. Yet there wasn't a mark on the floor."

He reached a triumphant deduction.

"So it was obvious to me immediately what had happened. The murderer, realising that his footprints might betray him, had polished the whole place up again."

Titus's voice, as he awarded them this elementary lesson in detection, was not free from a few remaining tremors of shock and grief; and Inspector Baker, partly in obedience to Sir Wenceslas's earlier pleas for mercy and partly in respect for the amateur security man's dutiful mastery over his personal distress, received this burst of assistance with patience. Next moment, he was glad he had done so, for the painstaking Titus went on to reveal himself not entirely a fool.

"The various cleaning implements are kept in the wash-room, across the hall from the office," he said, "and, most fortunately the floor-polisher, a weighted bumper, has a varnished handle. I've made inquiries and established that the last person to use it lawfully was one of the junior controllers, Pilot Officer Philip Cartwright. He cleaned the floors yesterday afternoon. To my certain knowledge, no one has touched these implements since we discovered the murder, because I locked them all up immediately. I suggest you examine at least the bumper for fingerprints," he ended, in a tone conveying rather more of an order than a suggestion, "and if you find any later prints superimposed on young Cartwright's, that will be highly significant."

"It will indeed," Inspector Baker congratulated him. "Or even," he glanced sideways at the nervous sub-commander, "any fingerprints at all, other than the junior controllers. I take it, Squadron Leader Merlin, polishing the floor won't be the most sought-after job among the seniors?"

Merlin's answer to this was prompt and anxious.

"Oh no, Inspector, it won't be as easy as that. We all polish the floors. There'll be everyone's prints on the bumper as well as Pip Cartwright's, because keeping the place clean and polished is a chore everyone has to take a turn at."

There was a just audible sigh of disapprobation from Titus Oates, and Merlin justified himself sharply. "We don't do it for fun, Inspector, or out of any love of traditional Service bull. It's a strict technical requirement, to keep dust and damp to a minimum, because it plays hell with the equipment if you don't. Any electronic premises have to be well polished: and as we aren't allowed to let in a covey of charwomen to do the dirty work, we've no choice but to get on with it ourselves. It's all part of the Project, and there's no one on St. Swithin's too good to be asked to polish a floor."

Titus relieved his feelings with mild sanctimoniousness.

"I don't think, Wiz," he observed gently, "you'd find Wing

Commander Swanton's fingerprints on the broom-handles, if you checked up on things at Ramswell."

Merlin looked at him levelly.

"Well, I'm sorry, but there it is. You'll find Squadron Leader Merlin's on the St. Swithin's brooms, Inspector, in company with everybody else's. Including," he added a little maliciously, "Sir Noel Osborne's. His civilian status equates to an Air Vice-Marshal's, I believe, but he's not too proud to be seen sweeping a floor if it means the gear's going to work better for it."

Titus's drawn face suddenly flamed into colour, and he gave vent to a sound undignifiedly near a snort. Sir Wenceslas eyed his two strained subordinates compassionately, and pacified them. "We don't need to quarrel over the dignities of labour just now. It's only if the inspector finds these high-executive prints superimposed on Cartwright's we've got a problem on our hands; and personally," he looked kindly on the harassed sub-commander, "I haven't the slightest alarm on that score, Wiz."

"Neither have I—neither have I, of course," agreed Titus, conscience stricken. "I hope you didn't think I meant to imply that, Inspector. It's only—well, I feel bound to say, sir," he burst out to the Air Marshal, "that Sir Noel Osborne's whole attitude towards Service discipline isn't such that I'd be tempted to cite what he does in defence of anything. As Merlin says, he is supposed to equate to an Air Vice-Marshal. For a man in that position, the example he sets the junior officers is disastrous."

He rounded on Sir Wenceslas in long pent-up indignation.

"Did you know, sir," he demanded, "he's brought a woman with him to the island?"

Sir Wenceslas obviously did not know. He jumped perceptibly, and the emotions chasing each other across his honest, bulldog face were comically decipherable. An initial purely

social embarrassment was succeeded by a far graver alarm of outraged security, followed by blank disbelief.

"A woman?" he ejaculated. "Noel?"

Merlin relaxed into his schoolboy smile.

"Not that sort of woman, sir," he reassured him. "And not Olga the Gremlin-from-the-Kremlin, either. It's only Lady Laetitia Osborne—his own wife," he explained to the inspector. "Apparently, the Earl's been wanting to fix a quarterly overhaul for his books and pictures here for some time, so when he heard Noel was down here all week, he got permission for Laetitia to come too. It's quite in order, sir. She's only cleared for the domestic site, of course, not the Ops Block, and I had a clearance signal in advance direct from Air Ministry."

"Nobody consulted anyone at Ramswell," protested Titus.

Sir Wenceslas recovered his poise.

"I don't recall anyone consulting me, either," he consoled the outraged security squadron leader. "But you know Yewmouth. He never holds with dealing with underlings. When he can't go direct to the Queen, he grudgingly makes do with the Prime Minister. Who signed the permit for Lady Laetitia, Merlin?"

Merlin told him, and Sir Wenceslas nodded resignedly.

"Yes, I quite see you wouldn't argue with that."

"I should have argued, if I'd known," persisted Titus, with the courage of strong and honest conviction. "I'd have opposed it irrevocably, no matter who signed it. It's most unfair and ill-advised for Sir Noel to be able to bring his wife here when he's away from home for one week, while there are men on St. Swithin's deferring marriage for three years for the sake of the Project. I was extremely shocked last night to find Lady Laetitia Osborne here."

Merlin's sea-tanned face flushed slightly.

"No one here minds in the very least," he interposed.

"After all, St. Swithin's is Laetitia's own home, even if the R.A.F. is temporarily in occupation, and old Yewmouth's got a perfect right to keep an eye on his library. Some of the books here are quite valuable, I believe, and it's a privilege he's ready to leave them with us. And we're all delighted to have his daughter as a Mess guest. We'd be very sorry indeed to have any unpleasantness caused on our behalf."

"But it's wrong. It's all wrong to have non-Project civilians here even in normal times. And it's making things extremely awkward now."

Titus turned to the detectives again.

"Don't read anything sinister into this," he said fairly, "because it's all on a par with Sir Noel's whole system of behaviour, in making himself as obstructive as possible to anyone trying to carry out an ordered programme of Service administration. But I must tell you this, Sir Wenceslas: when we first checked against sabotage and espionage this morning, I thought it advisable to institute an immediate personal search of the whole station. I wanted to assure myself that no unauthorised espionage tools—cameras or photographic films, for instance—were being concealed on the island. I didn't really expect to find any, but it was a check I thought ought to be made."

"Very wise," Sir Wenceslas concurred.

"Well, that was done. At least, it was done for all the Service personnel, and I'm happy to say we could find nothing amiss. But with Sir Noel and Lady Laetitia Osborne, I wasn't quite sure about the legal position. So, purely for the sake of the formalities, I had the Orderly Room type out a chit for me, certifying that they voluntarily submitted themselves to this routine examination. Not Lady Laetitia herself," he added, colouring a little, "but their room and personal property. They're occupying the Earl's own apartment, sir, with that great big four-poster bed, and I wanted to examine

that, and their suitcases and so forth. So I took this chit for Sir Noel to sign—purely as a formality.”

“And what happened? Wouldn’t he sign it?”

Titus drew a long breath and related the worst.

“He turned round quite flatly, sir, and refused to let me search the room altogether. He simply declined to co-operate at all.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

SQUADRON LEADER W. J. MERLIN—HE HAD BEEN CHRISTENED by the solid English names of William John, but for anyone coming into the R.A.F. with a signature like that, the name of Wiz was inevitable—walked back to the Officers' Mess a badly shaken man. He had not been expecting his gentlemanly offer to the police not to trust him to be accepted with quite such ungentlemanly promptness.

Merlin had been beginning to commend himself on the steadiness with which he had been carrying out his volunteered camera work. Photographic shots of the corpse of a close friend, from the diversity of aspects and under the harsh illumination Inspector Baker required, would have been strain enough had the death been only an accident, and had Merlin himself been as little involved in the resulting records as were the two impassive detectives. But in addition, as the examination went forward, Merlin found himself unnervingly recording nothing but trace after trace of his own large and unmistakable prints on the scene of the slaughter.

The two hours' respite before the boat arrived to raise the alarm had been put to excellent use, and the Operations Room, newly polished before Merlin's anti-sabotage activities, provided a most receptive background for the sub-commander's trail. Merlin watched with inward dismay but outward calm as his prints, and his prints alone, appeared successively on the perspex table where the body lay, on the switch-key which had cut off the Turvey sergeant's voice after the shot, and on the screw-clasp at which the P.B.X. disconnection had been made.

Inspector Baker looked thoughtful as each of these new signs appeared. But he made no comment, and no effort to dismiss the services of his auxiliary photographer, until they came to the Smith & Wesson pistol lying at the dead man's feet. This, Titus Oates consoled the inspector, had not been touched at all since the discovery of the murder. This, consequently, revealed no trace of Merlin or of anybody else, and Merlin, who had begun to sweat under the strain, relaxed considerably.

The pistol completed the first batch of photographs, and Merlin was preparing to take the harvest into the Folly's loft, which housed the Little Eva, technical store and the dark-room, when Inspector Baker halted him.

"It might be wiser," the detective suggested pleasantly, "before we go any further, if you *do* bring in another of your officers to assist you. We don't know how important any of these prints are going to be. On the face of it," he acknowledged pessimistically, "there's nothing that looks very promising. But one never knows what may come to light under magnification, so it's not fair to land you with the responsibility of getting out the negatives by yourself. If by any unlucky chance something vital happened to come out under-exposed, we must take care to provide you with a witness that the under-exposure wasn't deliberate."

This was kindly, tactful and as unmistakable as the fingerprints themselves. Poor Merlin, who had just begun to gain confidence in his aura of probity, turned white.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said, offended. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not develop them at all. But then, I don't suppose any of the others'll be particularly keen, either," he reflected fairly. "I'd better go and draw two names out of a hat for you—one to develop and the other to stand and watch him." The idea struck him as intolerable, and he substituted hastily, "Or I'll tell you what—shall I ask Sir Noel Osborne to do the developing for you?" He shot a just-perceptible

scowl at Titus as he added, "Noel'd be only too ready to help you, I'm sure. He doesn't stand on his dignity."

Inspector Baker hid a smile at this. But Sir Noel Osborne, he reflected, with his odd reactions to Titus's entirely sensible search-party, might be hardly the ideal collaborator.

He turned to Titus.

"What about you, Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates? Could you help us out, perhaps?"

"Develop photographs?" Titus, not pleased at having to acknowledge a deficiency, shook his head. "I'm afraid that's a little beyond me. It's rather outside the scope of my duties. I'm not an Operations man myself, you see, and although I try to familiarise myself with as much as I can of the operational procedure——"

"It's beyond me, too," Sir Wenceslas cut him short with cheerful guilt. "And I can see just what young Wiz thinks about that. If he and his controllers have to run pay parades and dole out the station library books, he thinks there's no earthly reason why Jones and Maltby-Oates shouldn't be capable of turning their hands to a little operational work when an emergency arises."

This was indeed so accurately what Merlin had been thinking that it brought back the ready smile to the sub-commander's face. Titus, who had been conscientiously rebuking himself in secret along much the same lines but did not think the ebullient Merlin ought to be encouraged, protested stiffly, "Well, I do my best to keep abreast of the general technique, sir. But photography's rather a minor sideline."

"Yes, of course, Titus. I was only joking," Sir Wenceslas soothed him. "I'm aware of your thoroughness in all sections of your duties."

Merlin was too kind-hearted to revenge himself further for the floor-polishing by making any challenge on this. But he pondered aggrievedly on it as, the lottery system having been

eventually chosen, he made his way to the Mess to select the two photographers.

He mused over the way in which he himself, as sub-commander of the island unit, tackled every week a formidable amount of paper-work concerned with domestic returns and accounts. Usually, he had the aid of a not over-intelligent young adjutant, but whenever the adjutant was on leave, as he was at present, the technical squadron leader undertook the entire work without even that aid. Although he had to admit that he carried out these administrative duties with laboriousness rather than brilliance, nevertheless he carried them out well enough to keep his island camp fed, clothed, paid, housed and in good heart without more than an occasional exasperated intervention from Ramswell or Bishop Bradbury.

The last recognition he could remember receiving from Sir Wenceslas of all this drudgery was a gentle and diplomatic hint that if St. Swithin's would match its administrative efficiency to its operational skill, life might be made a little easier for the overworked Ramswell commander.

Yet Titus, thought Merlin sulkily, had only to put forward one dignified and unsubstantiated claim to operational zeal to evoke this immediate and most gracious concurrence from the Air Marshal; although Titus's real operational knowledge, Merlin had nearly informed Sir Wenceslas, was so superficial that he had obviously never even heard of the radar station at Turvey until that morning. The Ramswell Operations Room, with which Titus was more familiar, had no line to the little radar out-station; and it had taken all Merlin's own graciousness and diplomacy to smooth out a most embarrassing scene between Titus and the touchy Noel Osborne, when Noel's explanation that "Topsy" was really a station called Turvey had been mistaken by Titus for a deplorable and ill-timed attempt at humour.

"I bet I'm fifty times more thorough on the admin. side than Titus is on the ops," Merlin told himself childishly, as

he sought his colleagues in the ante-room. His air of victimisation deepened as he found all four of them, with their two civilian guests, comfortably taking their ease round a roaring October fire, and just finishing a tea Merlin knew would now be half-cold.

The St. Swithin's operational strength was not normally quite as small as five officers. But the station had been declared "non-operational" for the duration of Noel Osborne's work on the experimental modifications, and the well-organised Wing Commander Swanton had sent most of the controllers to a course of General Service Training at the Sector headquarters. The island was left with only its two technical officers, and a skeleton Operations crew.

Merlin surveyed his "black list" complement with deep uneasiness. Although he had given Inspector Baker the names of all five of them, he did not at heart believe the list need be even as long as that, and he gloomily saw himself sharing it very shortly with only two of the others.

Bob Ames, his deputy chief controller, he thought a reasonable candidate for the C.I.D. men's consideration. His junior technical officer, Dougal Macleod, a studious and deeply ingenuous Hebridean aged twenty-three, was also just conceivable in the role of midnight murderer. But the remaining two junior controllers, Merlin reflected apprehensively, were hardly likely to engage the attention of Scotland Yard for long. They were twin brothers, Philip and Joseph Cartwright, only nineteen years old. Inspector Baker would waste very little time on a pair of innocent schoolboys like the Cartwrights, thought the uneasy sub-commander; who, at the age of twenty-seven, was still enough of an innocent schoolboy himself to have been extremely surprised if he had known some of the nineteen-year-old felons on whom Inspector Baker had not considered his time wasted.

Bob Ames, intercepting this critical survey and misinterpreting it, looked guilty as Merlin came towards the fire, and

apologised, "I'm so sorry, Wiz. It was getting so late we'd given you up. We thought you'd got trapped in the Block with the police, so we just went ahead without waiting."

"Hogs," criticised the sub-commander without passion, helping himself to a cress sandwich; and then, becoming aware of the presence of Noel Osborne's young wife, adding chivalrously, "except you, of course, Tisha. No, it's all right, Jo," he told Jo Cartwright, the Mess secretary, as he prepared to arrange fresh supplies of tea. "Don't bother. This'll do me, and the rest of them won't be over for ages. I think you'd better lay a late cook on, in fact, because I don't think they're even likely to be through by dinner-time. I've only came back myself for reinforcements."

He explained the lottery without superfluous comment. The Operations officers would have accepted it without comment too, but Noel Osborne unkindly voiced everyone's thoughts.

"Nasty, suspicious minds these busies have got, Wiz. Don't they trust us single-handed?"

Merlin, grateful for the comradeship of the word "us", shook his head.

"I can't blame them for that, Noel. I told them—I had to tell them, so I'd better tell all of you as well—that the technical skill shown in cutting the outside line convinces me the murderer was an Ops officer. So, naturally, they won't feel like taking risks with any of us."

His four fellow Operations officers received this announcement in unpleasant, but not entirely surprised, silence. Then Bob Ames agreed slowly: "No, naturally not. By the way, Wiz—perhaps I shouldn't ask you this, and I don't insist on an answer—but when you say you 'had to' tell them it was an Ops officer, did you feel you 'had to' specify any particular one of us? Or did you just scatter suspicion generally around between the four of us?"

The victimised Merlin felt more deeply victimised still.

"Among the five of us, you mean," he corrected curtly. "Bob, for pity's sake, what a shocking thing to suggest! I don't like this any better than you do, but you know perfectly well I've *got* to point these things out. Of course I didn't specify anyone in particular. And of course I included myself just as much as everyone else—I think that's a most unjustified thing to suggest."

Bob stared at him in bewilderment.

"Hang on, old boy. You—me—Pip—Jo; four of us."

"And Dougal."

"You said Ops officers," said Bob, looking a little more cheerful at this increase in the black list. "That means the controllers, surely. Doug's not an Ops officer. He's technical."

Merlin, mollified, began an instant apology, but now it was the young Hebridean technical officer's turn to take offence.

"That was rather ridiculous, Bob," he protested with dignity. "It was obvious he must mean 'operational' as opposed to the domestic staff. I'm not anxious to court suspicion, of course, but I'm not anxious to dodge anything, either, and it's quite clear if there's been something involving a technical skill the domestic staff haven't got, there's nothing the controllers could know how to do, that I couldn't."

"The same modest thought," Noel Osborne, Little Eva's inventor, murmured benignly, "has also crossed *my* mind, Wiz. I'm not anxious to dodge anything, either. You'd better expand your 'all five of us' to 'all six of us', don't you think?"

Merlin smiled and shook his head, and Laetitia Osborne turned dark eyes on him, almost savagely.

"Oh yes, you must, Wiz," she appealed to him, with an angry glance at her husband. "Do, or you'll break poor Noel's heart. He's been doing his level best all day to produce himself as a murder suspect. And I'm quite sure Sir Know-all would much rather go to the gallows than have to admit there's anything in the boffin line that five other people know about, and he doesn't."

Noel's sharp, ferret-like features screwed into an unrepentant grin.

"No, I don't think it'd be Noel, Tisha," Merlin placated her. "This isn't a matter of boffinry, only the local telephone layout. You see, the murderer didn't cut the outside line off on the normal switch-rack, the way an outsider would. If he had done, we might have had Noel on the list, but this was a way Noel wouldn't know about."

Bob Ames became even more cheerful.

"Not on the switch-rack? Then it's a way I don't know about, either," he declared. "How else can you possibly do it?"

Merlin eyed him very narrowly.

"*You'd* better tell *me*," he suggested.

Dougal, the young technician, opened his mouth to answer him, but the sub-commander silenced him.

"Not you, Doug. One of the controllers."

"Well, obviously." Pip Cartwright spoke up without hesitation. "You could get it in the Ops Room, where the lines go out of the building, and rip it apart there. But why should anyone have gone to that much trouble, I wonder?" he mused intrigued. "It means standing around on chairs and things, and it's far simpler just to hoick the lead out on the switch-rack."

"He couldn't get in the switch-room. The door was locked," Merlin explained, drawing a hand across a forehead suddenly damp with sweat. "Gosh, Bob, you gave me a bad moment there," he confessed. "Not that it's very much better, I suppose, each of us knowing we've only four other people to suspect. But if you'd levelled it down still further and eliminated the controllers——"

He looked eloquently at Dougal, and Dougal unflatteringly completed the sentence for him.

"That would have proved it was you, sir," he ejaculated in awe.

"Or you," pointed out Merlin swiftly.

"Well, yes. To you, I suppose it'd have proved it was me. How extraordinary!" Dougal sounded considerably surprised. "Not really extraordinary, though," he explained it to himself, after a split-second's investigation, "because if it wasn't either of us and we were the only two who could have disconnected the line, then the murderer couldn't have disconnected it and the problem wouldn't arise."

At this profound piece of reasoning, the Cartwright twins set up a cheer, and Noel Osborne congratulated him: "Good old Dougal. Which came first, the hen or the egg? But you're dead wrong, you know, Wiz," he told the sub-commander, with a mischievous glance at Laetitia. "I don't know why you should think that disconnection's beyond *my* mechanical capabilities. It's merely a matter of undoing a screw-clasp and pulling the cable apart. A child could do it."

Merlin stared at him.

"Yes, that's all," he agreed. "But the telephone network's expanded so much since the Service took over that I didn't think you'd know which line was which. There wasn't a P.B.X. on the domestic site at all in your day, and there are several other cables going out at that point too. They're none of them labelled."

"There are six, to be exact," outlined Noel with precision. "There's the outside cable to Turvey and Bishop Bradbury, the outside cable to Yewmouth Exchange, three lines to the gunposts and the multi-channel feed between the master switch-rack and P.B.X. It was the multi-channel feed that was disconnected, and there's no possible way of mistaking that, if you know anything about wiring at all. It's about one-and-a-half times the thickness of the others."

"I'd no idea you'd bother to keep track of things like that," stammered Merlin, shocked both by the implications of this revelation, and also by the cheerful way it had been made in front of the outsider, Laetitia.

"Don't be childish, Wiz. I practically built this place with my bare hands. You don't suppose I've sat back for the past two years and watched you and Victor Swanton weave bigger and better telephone cables all round my *magnum opus* without checking whether I considered them really necessary, do you?"

"I didn't know any of that," stated Bob Ames happily.

"Bob, you must have done. Doug and I disconnect those cables at that point regularly twice a month, every time we do major maintenance on Channel B," protested Merlin.

"Yes, but I've no idea what you're doing. I know you put the lines out of action for a spell, but I never knew how. I don't even know the difference between a telephone line and a feeder line, and I certainly wouldn't dare muck about undoing screw-clasps. I've no wish to get myself electrocuted."

"Or hanged," suggested Noel sardonically.

Bob turned on him.

"Are you insinuating I'm not telling the truth?"

"Don't be stupid, Bob. What's the point of making everything even more unpleasant than it is already?" asked Merlin wearily. "Obviously, we can't all be telling the truth, and we're not going to start insinuating who is and who isn't. But if the twins can learn all about the telephone lines in the short time they've been here, so could you if you'd wanted to. I shan't reduce the black list on that account." He flicked a curious glance at Noel, and added uncomfortably, "I'll have to expand it, though, Noel, on what *you*'ve said, and I'll have to tell the police that, too, I'm afraid."

"I can cope with the police," promised Noel grimly. "And you can expand your list of names to go into the hat for this dark-room draw, too, if you like. I'm quite happy to take my fair share."

"No, best not, though thank you very much." Merlin's manner lightened. "I've already had one good stripping-down by Titus in front of Good King Wenceslas because you and

I stoop to sweep the floors, Noel. I don't think he'd like you to turn your Air Vice-Marshal hand to developing pictures for policemen. Specially these policemen." He laughed. "One of them isn't even an inspector, poor wretch, and Titus is nearly out of his mind about him. He keeps following him round the Block and standing in front of things so the sergeant can't find out what they're for."

Noel snorted. He had not yet forgiven Titus for the scene over the Topsy-Turvey information.

"If the sergeant can do that," he growled, "he'll be doing a jolly sight better than Titus himself." This sentiment, chiming so harmoniously with what Merlin himself had recently been thinking, was received with another smile from the sub-commander. But the smile vanished when Noel went on, illogically, "Incidentally, Wiz, if you're going to get tough with Bob and insist on including the labouring classes in your black list, I think you ought to include Titus as well. After all, if a controller can learn about telephone cables, a security man can too. Titus gets quite as good a chance to pick up things like that as the twins do. And I don't want to be unsympathetic," he said, very unsympathetically indeed, "but all this grief and shock of Titus's might just as easily be symptoms of remorse. If you reckon someone shot Swanton in a personal quarrel, it's more likely to be one of his own family than anyone else. People get on each other's nerves much worse at home than at work, you know, and if you look into these things, you'll find a very high proportion of murder victims get killed by their near relations."

Merlin looked honestly shocked.

"Oh, no, Noel. I can't have you talk like that—that's a most cruel suggestion. Poor old Titus is quite genuinely broken up, and you know it; and you also know Titus couldn't have done that to the cable, not in a hundred years. He can't even mend a fuse. I'm not playing intellectual games with this black list. It's a serious list, for serious consideration; and I

don't know what it'd do to poor Titus if he ever heard someone seriously suggesting a horrible thing like that about him."

Bob Ames looked mutinous.

"You've suggested it about *me*," he pointed out.

"That's different, Bob. You're not part of Victor's family. I've known old Titus Oates getting on for twenty years now, ever since he married Victor's sister, and I can assure you, he was absolutely devoted to Victor. It'd be very unkind to start saying things like that about him."

"Unkind or not," said Bob, determinedly, "I think we're going to say them. Not to Titus himself, poor old coot, I quite agree. But to the police, I think we certainly ought. We *must* think of ourselves as well as him, and seven's an easier number than six to carry the weight of this, say what you will."

Merlin looked ever further shocked, and Bob brought out defiantly: "Why not face the truth, Wiz? Whoever did this had a couple of hours to clean up after it, and no one's going to catch up on him after a start like that. My bet is, the whole lot of us are going to have to soldier on with this round our necks for the next ten years or so, because murder doesn't get forgotten very quickly. So the wider we can spread the load, the better. We've got to drag in as many as we possibly can, Noel and Titus and all the domestic staff too, if we can find any way of doing it. I give you due notice, Wiz, I shall tell the police, if they're going to include me they must include Titus as well."

Merlin suppressed a human feeling that this would be poetic justice for Titus, after his complacent claim to Good King Wenceslas. He eyed his insubordinate deputy unpromisingly.

"No, you won't, Bob. You know perfectly well Titus isn't capable of it, even if he knew all about it in theory, which I don't think he does. Our duty is perfectly clear," he told the three younger officers seriously, "If you've useful information to give the police, certainly give it to them, no matter .

who you think it implicates. But you mustn't deliberately set yourselves out to confuse them, just to make it a little easier for everyone all round. You can call that an order," he ended authoritatively.

"Are you sure you're entitled to give us orders on things like that, sir?" Bob asked him, very politely.

Merlin, who was far from sure, responded equally politely, "Would you like me to raise that with Good King Wenceslas?"

There was a challenging silence. Then Douglas declared worriedly, "But I haven't any information I can think of, either way," and the tension snapped.

"Never mind Duggie," Noel comforted him. "The police must manage to muddle through somehow without your expert assistance. They'll make it, somehow."

Merlin took advantage of this general distraction to implore his deputy in an anxious undertone, "Bob, don't make things difficult like this. I can't cope with it."

Bob, surveying his exhausted face, relented in manner, if not in resolution. He did not take back his stated intention, but he offered sympathetically, "Look, there's no need to fool around putting names in hats, Wiz. We can't draw the twins to go over together in any case, because if one's implicated, the other's bound to play confederate. And you look as if you've had your fair share of running around for a bit. So if you like, I'll do the dark-room job for one, and the twins can toss up for the other."

Merlin half-closed his eyes.

"Or Dougal?"

"I'm not up on the photography side, sir," protested Dougal, with the shocked departmentalism of the craftsman offered an alien and only semi-skilled craft.

Merlin suppressed a grin and breathed a prayer of thanks that Sir Wenceslas and Titus had not heard this.

"Then it's high time you learned," he reproved him.

"I'll go with Bob, sir," offered Jo Cartwright. "Pip'll be in

enough of a jam already if they don't detect anyone else's spoor on top of his on that ruddy bumper. I don't think he'd better blur the vital negative as well." He hesitated. "It won't mean actually having to see the body, will it, Wiz?" he asked nervously. "I've never seen a dead body, actually."

Merlin's tea-cup rattled momentarily on its saucer.

• "No, neither had I. And this isn't a good one to start on. There's several photographs of it among the stuff you'll be developing, I'm afraid, Jo, but you won't need to see it itself. It—he," he corrected himself, jibbing at the inhuman pronoun, "is in the Ops Room, and you needn't go in there."

He turned gratefully to Bob.

"If you really don't mind it that way, Bob, I think I'll take you up on it. I do feel a bit wore out."

It did not strike him, or if it did he was too tired to worry about it, that Inspector Baker might have preferred the original lottery rather than to be landed with two unhaphazard volunteers.

This did strike the intelligent Noel Osborne, but he did not raise the point. If occasion arose, he decided, it might prove a useful red herring later on.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE INSPECTOR AND THE AIR MARSHAL HAD TO WAIT A LITTLE longer for the arrival of the two dark-room volunteers, for the departure of Bob and Jo for the Operations Block was delayed by an emergency meeting of the Officers' Mess. The subject of the emergency was Sergeant Hughes.

The meeting was informal and improperly constituted, since it hospitably included not only Noel Osborne, who was an honorary member of the Mess, but also his wife Laetitia, who was not. Merlin, the Mess President, opened it by the simple process of demanding of the others, as he poured himself a second cup of tea, "And now, there's the problem of this unfortunate low-caste police sergeant. What does anyone feel we should do about him? Shall we stick to the existing arrangements and accommodate them both in the Officer's Mess as if they were both inspectors? Or are there any strong feelings we ought to board out the sergeant with the Gauleiter, the Skiffle Group Captain and the Old Man of the Sea?"

In this unceremonious fashion, the St. Swithin's officers were accustomed to refer to the occupants of the Sergeants' Mess, the Service Police sergeant, the young sergeant armourer and the wise and weathered old flight sergeant in charge of the island's boats and boats' crews. These three were the unit's only senior N.C.O.s, and they led a life of overcrowded privilege together in what had once been the butler's pantry.

"Surely, do what we do with Noel's boys, won't we?" asked Jo, who did not want the bother of rearranging bedrooms. "We never inquire into whether any of them have

officer status. They just automatically come in here with us. Shouldn't we do the same for the police? It'll be less deadly for them if they can stay together, I'd say. I don't suppose they'll be enjoying this very much more than we will."

"Titus won't approve if we put up a sergeant in here," warned Bob Ames. "And the Sector Commander would play hell, if ever he heard about it. Hadn't you better raise that with Good King Wenceslas, too," he inquired of Merlin, a little insolently, "and see what he thinks, just to be on the safe side?"

Merlin chastened the insolence with a last-warning glance, and said, "Good King Wenceslas said himself the police aren't quite on the same footing as the other Services. I think this is something for the Mess itself to decide, not the Mess guests."

"The police aren't a Service at all," laid down Noel Osborne didactically. "They're a purely civilian body, and the more they get that pointed out to them, the better for their souls. A militarised police force is an abomination. You have that sergeant in here, as a matter of principle."

"As a matter of interest, too," contributed Pip Cartwright, shrewdly. "You know what'll happen if we don't. We'll have every interesting little scandal they unearth drunk in with the evening noggin in the Sergeants' Mess, and the next thing you know, there'll be all the Officers' Mess dirty washing set to calypso rhythm by the Skiffle Group Captain at the Christmas camp concert, and we'll all be expected to laugh heartily."

Merlin dropped down on to the sofa beside Laetitia, looking severely harassed. She ran a soft hand over his sea-tanned forehead and soothed him. "Don't frown like that, Wiz my angel-boy. You'll get all lines, and it won't suit you a bit. Not to worry. The police won't have time to spare sorting through any dirty washing that's not right under their noses. They'll be far too busy steaming round my poor little Folly magnifying significant pieces of fluff and dusting off broom-handles to bother about outside scandals. You're all quite safe."

Wiz smiled at her and warned her, "They think *you're* an

outside scandal, I may tell you. At least, Titus and Good King Wenceslas do."

"Oh, not Wenceslas, surely? He's a little woolly lamb."

Merlin's smile turned to a grin.

"Well, he was bleating a bit about you and your V.I.P. permits. And no one's awfully fond of *you*, either, Noel, at the moment. Titus told on you, about not letting him play Customs and Excise with your suitcases, and I don't think Scotland Yard went much on that!"

"I'm not worried about Scotland Yard. The most noble the Earl of Yewmouth's bound to have some second cousin who's high up in M.I. 5," answered Noel placidly, coming over to take Laetitia's hand unobtrusively from the sub-commander's hair and make her keep it in her lap. "He doesn't go in for things like having a son-in-law who's in prison. An occasional member of the family getting executed on Tower Hill, yes. But not the condemned cell at Brixton. That's frightfully common. He won't let them send me to gaol, will he, Tish?"

"Not without an iron mask," she promised him, and Merlin laughed.

"Noel, you're a dreadful and boring inverted snob," he accused his civilian superior disrespectfully. "Perhaps you'd like us to send the Chief Inspector to the Sergeants' Mess and keep Sergeant Taffy-the-Search-Warrant in with us?"

"No, have them both in here where we can keep an eye on them," advised Noel, not a whit affronted.

"Well, I think we will. That's a good point, Pip, about the scandal, and it should keep even Bishop Bradbury happy if there are any questions asked later," Merlin decided.

Neither Inspector Baker nor Sergeant Hughes were allowed to suspect anything of this debate; and, even if he had known of it, Sergeant Hughes would have been too tired at the end of their long evening's work to appreciate the honour of falling asleep like a log in a bed of commissioned rank.

Next door to him, Inspector Baker also took in very little

of his surroundings that night. But next morning, awakened by a very young, very awed batman with a cup of tea made with tinned milk, he sat up to find himself in a most extraordinary room.

The bedroom belonged to one of the absent Little Eva controllers, and was furnished with the stolid utilitarianism of the Royal Air Force. But the indulgent landlord, the Earl of Yewmouth, had left on the floor a luxurious Axminster carpet, and over the chimney-piece a delightful large oil-painting of a dark-haired, sloe-eyed Hanoverian beauty wearing an exceedingly low-cut gown.

To these decorations, the controller himself had added, on the opposite wall, a flight of about a dozen magazine prints of pin-up girls and film starlets, in stages of undress even more scandalous than was that of the girl in the oil-painting.

The pin-up girls and film starlets, gazing upwards and open-mouthed into the middle distance, kept their eyes respectably averted as the inspector began to dress. Not so the sloe-eyed beauty over the chimney-piece. As Inspector Baker pulled his shirt over his head, he caught her gazing down on him with a Mona Lisa smile as if, he decided conceitedly, she found the man satisfactory even if she were not greatly impressed by his far-from-new underwear.

"Not that you look much of an authority on underwear, milady," he rebuked her, aloud, as he climbed protectively into his trousers.

She continued to smile enigmatically on him until he left her to collect Sergeant Hughes; and, when the two C.I.D. men had successfully trailed an enticing smell of bacon down a white wooden staircase into the Officers' Mess dining-room, he was disconcerted to encounter her again, alive this time and modestly dressed in Shetland tweed, but still watching his entry with the same challenging half-smile.

Titus Oates, one of the only other two people in the room, gave him the explanation.

"Ah, Inspector. Ah, Sergeant," added Titus with painful but resolute democracy. "Good morning. Up betimes, I see. Let me see, I don't think you met Sir Noel and Lady Laetitia last night, did you. Let me introduce you now. Lady Laetitia, this is Chief Inspector Baker, and Sergeant Hughes, both of Scotland Yard." The efficient little security squadron leader did not have to hesitate before remembering their names.

Inspector Baker bowed demurely to the picture's descendant and found his colour rising a little. Then, remembering Titus's account of the search-party refusal, he eyed the Little Eva inventor curiously.

Sir Noel looked a much younger, much more vulnerable man than the blustering John Bull he had been imagining. The physicist was hardly into middle age, and his flaming red hair and sharp, highly-intelligent features spoke more of the neurotic than the bully.

Noel eyed the inspector back with equal curiosity, gave him a smile much shyer than Laetitia's and mumbled "How do you do?" with nervous formality, and with an unexpectedly Cockney accent. Then there was a scuffle in the doorway, and the Cartwright twins tumbled into the room like a couple of puppies.

"Panic over, Jo," observed Pip, glancing comprehensively round the table. "We aren't the last. The last one down has to make the toast," he explained to the Scotland Yard men, showing them an electric toaster on a lead long enough to carry it to any place at the table, "and, with such hoards of bods at the trough this morning, that'll be quite a proposition. It'll be interesting to see what happens," he added, as Merlin came in behind him, "if it's Good King Wenceslas."

Titus Oates sent him a repressive frown across the table, and Sergeant Hughes whispered thankfully into his inspector's ear, "I'm glad Titus isn't the man in charge here. I'd hate the toast-making to go by seniority." But the impending disciplinary crisis in toast-making was averted by the appearance

of the Air Marshal, while Bob Ames and Dougal Macleod were still to come.

Sir Wenceslas crossed the room to greet Laetitia with a warm handshake, a twinkling eye and a slightly malicious, "Laetitia, my dear, what a most unexpected pleasure to find you here with us. I wish I'd known earlier you were proposing a visit. I'd have liked to have done something about it."

Inspector Baker saw Merlin drop his head hastily, Noel flash the Air Marshal an open grin and Laetitia look at him disarmingly.

"You're not really cross, are you, Sire? I'm not prying into any of your beautiful secrets. I haven't learned anything I didn't know already from the papers I take out of Noel's pockets when his suits go to the dry cleaner's, and I did want to be on the island this particular week, seeing Noel had to be here anyway. It's our seventh wedding anniversary tomorrow, you see, and we spent our honeymoon here."

Titus looked unutterably shocked, and Sir Wenceslas advised hastily, "Better stick to the pictures-and-books story, Tisha. It's a much more acceptable explanation."

"Well, I *am* dusting a tome from time to time as well. So you will let me stay, Sire, won't you?"

She widened her slanting dark eyes to their fullest and most appealing. Sir Wenceslas, thinking of the signature on her permit, said chivalrously, "How can I refuse you?" Then, turning to her husband, he asked "How are you, Noel? I hear you've been making an infernal nuisance of yourself."

His voice was still bantering; in the presence of two pilot officers, it was hardly likely to be anything else, but Inspector Baker saw Noel shoot him an almost tremulous glance, as if he needed reassurance that Sir Wenceslas did not really think he was a nuisance.

"All this refusal to co-operate in the security measures," Sir Wenceslas rebuked him in playful earnest. "It's very silly, Noel. People will think you've got something to hide."

Noel turned his glance on Titus, who began concentrating on

spooning up cornflakes. The physicist's mouth tightened. Then he said, with another of his self-conscious smiles for the detectives, "So I have got something to hide. Long woollen underpants with little holes in them."

The Cartwright twins and Merlin greeted this uproariously, and Inspector Baker, with memories of his recent ordeal by oil-painting, had to laugh in sympathy. The oil-painting's reincarnation protested, "Noel, what an awful slander. As if I'd let you. He has the most beautiful underpants," she assured the young officers, solemnly. "Frimled nylon, exquisitely embroidered with the flags of all the nations. Don't you listen to him."

"Make a note," Merlin instructed Pip, "and on the first appropriate occasion, we'll investigate these conflicting reports empirically." He saw the deepening disapproval on Titus's face, remembered the unpleasant duties lying ahead of the dead man's brother-in-law that day, and stopped joking. "If it's all right with you, sir," he proposed to Sir Wenceslas quietly, "may I go over to Ramswell with Titus this morning to break it to Clare—Victor's wife?"

Titus, who had a dreadful morning to look forward to, raised his head.

Help in breaking the news, Inspector Baker thought, ought not to be unwelcome, for there were two households to which it must be carried. In one was the wing commander's young widow, left with a two-and-a-half-year-old son. In the other was Titus's own wife, Swanton's sister who had reared him since his babyhood, and her elderly father, a retired R.A.F. officer whose life was now centred on his successful and ambitious only son.

This double task had, the inspector knew, been troubling Titus badly. Nevertheless, his expression at the sub-commander's offer was very dubious, and Inspector Baker wondered whether Titus was as ready as the generous Sir Wenceslas to accept Merlin's unsupported word for his innocence.

"Do you think, in the circumstances, that'd be quite in good taste, Wiz?" was all Titus asked, non-committally.

Merlin shot him a hunted, unhappy glance.

"The section commander's expected to call on the family of any man who dies on his unit," he reminded him. "Even if it's a rookie who's only been on the unit five minutes. And I've known Victor all my life—all Ramswell knows that. What do you think everybody's going to imagine if I stay away?"

He suddenly sounded almost on the verge of tears.

"I don't want that. Please, you've got to let me come with you, Titus," he implored in a low, intense voice, "or people might say—they might say I didn't like to come because I was the one responsible."

"If that's the way you feel about it, you must certainly go," pronounced Sir Wenceslas decisively, "although I'm quite sure, Merlin, no one'd think anything so unwarrantable. Still, I was thinking of coming to Ramswell myself, to see what temporary arrangements we must fix up over there until poor Swanton's successor's appointed; and I'll appreciate your guidance on the Ops side. I don't know what the police requirements are, of course." He turned to Inspector Baker. "But I suppose if we ask anyone leaving the island to submit to a search before they leave, and search the boat itself as well, that'll cover any lingering doubts over espionage?"

Inspector Baker nodded.

"Does that suit you all right, Titus?" inquired the Air Marshal.

It didn't leave Titus much choice, thought Inspector Baker with a smothered grin. Titus evidently thought the same, for his expression was still dissenting as his words assented reluctantly, "Very well, sir, yes. If Squadron Leader Merlin feels that's the right thing to do, I'll be glad of his help."

CHAPTER NINE

THE LATE-SLEEPING BOB AMES HAD NOT QUITE WORKED HIS way through the toasting of a young mountain of bread when Merlin, seeing Inspector Baker's plate empty, rose from the table, touched him on the shoulder and led him to the wing which served the island unit as an administrative block.

Here, he showed him into a small room labelled "O.C."

"I thought it'd be a good idea," he explained, "if I gave you my admin. office for your own. You ought really to have somewhere where the airmen can come and have a word with you without Titus or me or Sir Wenceslas breathing down their necks all the time. If anyone here *has* got any useful information for you," he opined, "they'll be more likely to spill it out in our absence than our presence."

"What sort of information?"

"Well, anything. But I was thinking chiefly of someone who might perhaps have seen something significant immediately before or after the murder. Someone going over to the Ops Block, I mean, or someone coming back, when everybody claims to have been safely asleep in bed. Titus and I have already called the camp together to ask if anyone saw anything unusual, and we didn't have any response. But that's not surprising. Partly," he commented commonsensically, "because round about two in the morning, you don't expect to find many people seeing or hearing anything. But partly because, even if anyone had, they might not feel inclined to own up to it to Titus or me. Camp lights out are at twelve-thirty,

you see, and if any of the airmen were up and about to notice things after that—well, they were up and about after no good. I'm not thinking about things like espionage," he added with a rather dry grin. "Merely crimes like plundering the larder if they felt any pangs of midnight hunger, or trying to deal with some drunk and disorderly oppo off the liberty run. If there was anything like that going on, I'd hardly expect them to step forward without any qualms and tell Titus all about it. But they might tell you."

He frowned.

"There's another thing. Suppose one of them does know something which implicates one particular officer, or he thinks it does. In theory, I know it's his social duty to stand up and say so, regardless of the consequences. But in practice, he's far more likely to say to himself, 'What if I'm wrong and there's an innocent explanation, and I get up and land So-and-so in the cart over nothing. I'll have him on my neck for the rest of my time.' He probably would, too," acknowledged the sub-commander candidly.

Inspector Baker nodded.

"But you think they'd come forward to us?"

"I think so, yes. I'll make it quite clear to them that anything they tell you won't be relayed to us, or if it is, the informant's name won't be relayed with it. And, if you like to fix any particular periods of the day when either you or your sergeant can guarantee to be available here by yourselves, I'll have the times published in D.R.O.s. Of course, I doubt very much if you'll gain anything from your vigils," he admitted with a faint smile. "Discipline at St. Swithin's isn't really quite as bad as Titus makes out, and I expect all the airmen were in bed and asleep, as they ought to be. But the possibility ought to be covered."

"Yes, it ought. Thank you." Inspector Baker pondered, and then asked, "But you know your island better than I do. Do you really think if anyone was setting out on a desperate

affair like murder, there's much chance he'd allow himself to be seen on the way?"

The sub-commander hesitated.

"He could easily make sure he wasn't," he acknowledged. "But, Inspector." He hesitated still more, and then brought out: "I don't know how much backseat-driving you're willing to take from us all. But might I suggest just one thing to you?"

This display of diffidence was in such marked contrast to the other squadron leader's authoritarianism that Inspector Baker began to consider Merlin more sympathetically. After all, he reflected charitably, this painful uneasiness of manner might mean something less sinister than the pangs of a personally guilty conscience. From what he had gathered both from Sir Wenceslas Jones's brief outline of the Project's history and from the habitual mild censoriousness of Titus Qates, Merlin might very well not be the self-assured administrator his squadron leader's rank implied.

Brought to early promotion partly through technical brilliance and partly, guessed the inspector, through the sheer good fortune of being the man already there when the Project was taken over from the civilians and the Service strength expanded, Merlin might now have more on his mind than worries over his own behaviour. It would be understandable if a conscientious but inexperienced and possibly slightly incompetent young executive should tremble a little at finding his island kingdom suddenly exposed to the searching examination of Scotland Yard.

Inspector Baker smiled.

"I don't mind a backseat-driver in these circumstances," he encouraged him, "when you're so much more familiar with the roads than I am. Any suggestions are welcome."

"Well, I wouldn't say this was a premeditated job." Merlin gained confidence. "If it were, there'd be so many better ways of doing it. Boats—minefields—loose leads with thirty thousand volts on them; any of those disasters could be written

off as an accident, and no questions asked—or at least, not very many. There'd be a Court of Inquiry, but it wouldn't be a very formidable one, because they wouldn't call in anyone from outside the Project to investigate something they thought was mere carelessness. You'd be sure of getting away with that sort of murder. But this way, it's obviously a police job."

This struck Inspector Baker as sensible enough.

"Then what are you suggesting happened?"

Merlin paused.

"Mind you, I'm only guessing," he said carefully. "But there was that rather odd threat of Wing Commander Swanton's dinner, about someone going to wish he'd been drowned."

He smiled awkwardly.

"Now, that sort of thing," he said, "might be enough to put a breeze up quite a number of people. I must admit, at the time I quite thought it was aimed at *me*—and I'm still not half sure it wasn't. But there might be several other people equally sure it was aimed at *them*—it'd all depend how clear your conscience happened to be, wouldn't it? So I've been wondering, after they'd spent such a friendly and mellow evening with Swanton round the ante-room fire, whether perhaps someone thought that might be a better mood to catch him in, to have it out with him, than wait till next morning, when he'd be on duty and official."

Inspector Baker looked dubious.

"Are you suggesting the murderer originally followed Swanton over to the Block with no deeper intention than to have this trouble out in words?"

Merlin nodded.

"Yes. It's not unlikely," he said. "We very often choose the Operations Office for that sort of interview, although not usually at ~~that~~ that hour of the night, of course. It's less public than the Mess, if you're afraid someone may start shouting at

you, or send you off with an obvious flea in your ear. I invariably pick the Ops Office myself, if I have to say anything objectionable to one of the officers. And I don't think there can be much doubt the murderer went into the Block innocently in the first place," he pointed out. "Otherwise, he'd never have allowed his name to go down in the Operations Block Diary at all, would he?"

Inspector Baker regarded his diffident backseat-driver with a growing respect.

"No, that's certainly a point."

Merlin's friendly, anxious face began to show signs of distress.

"I don't know what you're like, Inspector," he said, "but I know, for myself, if I'm ever in trouble I like to get it over there and then. I can't wait like an ox until the butcher feels ready to pole-axe me in his own good time. I couldn't have gone calmly to bed that night if I'd thought there was a first-class storm hanging over me. I'd have had a shot at tackling Swanton, if I'd had the chance, and I think the murderer must have felt the same. But it was unfortunate he picked the Operations Office for it, with that loaded revolver sitting there, so ready to hand."

He lowered his head and was silent for a moment. Then he numbed, "This is a horrible way to talk about a dead man, Inspector, and I hope you won't think too badly of me for it. But it isn't a time for blinking at facts, and the fact was, Victor Swanton did have a most exasperating manner sometimes. And that pistol *was* dangerously handy. It's a special emergency weapon we keep in the Operations Office safe, ready loaded for action."

A line of sweat began to show on his forehead.

"And the safe would probably be open at the time," he reminded the inspector, "So they could put the secret correspondence away."

Inspector Baker remarked his obvious discomfort, and surveyed him narrowly.

"Is your idea," he asked, "that Swanton's manner provoked an unpremeditated shooting?"

Merlin's face furrowed painfully.

"It could have done, Inspector. I'm sorry, but I must say that. Swanton had a dreadfully unyielding streak in him, once he'd made up his mind against anyone, and a most high-and-mighty, supercilious way of brushing aside perfectly valid arguments and explanations that's once or twice driven *me* nearly to screaming point with him. And I was a good friend of Swanton's, and have been used to his moods for a great many years. To someone who didn't know him so well, and perhaps," he drew a hand across his face, "didn't like him so well either, it might perhaps have been enough."

"That's an interesting interpretation." Inspector Baker's tone was not free from a certain amount of provocation itself. "Two men in an argument, both having had a certain amount of drink just before—a loaded pistol handy, and one man with a notoriously provoking manner." He eyed the tormented sub-commander even more narrowly, and commented experimentally, "There's a chance that might only be manslaughter, of course."

Merlin raised haunted eyes.

"It's not manslaughter," he pronounced, desolately. "I wish to God I could think it was. That'd at least be relatively kind and clean. But this was far more horrible. This was murder all right."

He shuddered.

"If it was me," he burst out, "I don't think I'd want to live with myself any more. You might forgive yourself one red, roaring moment of frenzy. That might happen to anyone. But this was terrible—it doesn't bear thinking of, how long-drawn-out it must have been. Think of the distance between the Ops Office, where the pistol was, and the place Victor finally got shot."

He clenched his fists.

"Of course, as you say, the murderer probably had a bit of drink in him, and Vic can't have been stone cold sober, either, or he'd have had the good sense to play it down until the murderer got his head back again. There's no one on the island, *no one*," he declared passionately, "who'd do a dreadful thing like that in cold blood. But I suppose neither of them was thinking very clearly. Vic must have lost his head too, and made a bolt for it. And the murderer's reaction was 'I've got to get him, quick, or he'll raise an alarm'. Like that—no mercy about it. No thought that he'd got a gun and Victor hadn't, and perhaps if he took pity and spared Victor, Vic might take pity in return and spare him."

Merlin's face was torn with strain, as if the effort to do simultaneous justice to his friend the murdered man and his friend the murderer were too much for him.

"God knows how long they spent playing hide-and-seek round the Block. It must have been shocking. There were so many different ways Vic might have tried to raise help. There are telephones in the Ops Room, the Ops Office, the loft and the switch-room, or he might even have tried making a dash for the outside door and getting right away. The murderer'd have to watch all those—but there was one thing he didn't know, and consequently wouldn't be watching for."

He drew a breath between a sigh and a sob.

"It was a pity Victor thought of it at all. There's a Naval exercise taking place this week, you see, and that meant that Turvey radar would be manned up, and available to answer the Topsy line. We hadn't been told about the exercise at St. Swithin's, because the Project's off operations this week while Noel Osborne carries out his modifications. But Victor, I suppose, *had* been told, and he realised the murderer wouldn't know. So, instead of just lying low until they'd both had a chance to come to their senses, he decided to have a shot at sending for help that way."

His voice was very unsteady.

It must have taken a pretty long time to work round to that control-desk telephone without being seen or heard—it must have seemed a pretty long time to Victor, anyway. He'd have achieved it quite successfully, though, if only that Turvey supervisor'd been a bit quicker-witted. But he's a lazy swine—he's a murderer, if you like," Merlin accused the Turvey man bitterly, "and he couldn't be bothered to wait and find out what the whispering was about. So he said 'Speak up'—and Victor did, and the murderer heard him."

He turned his back on the detective, and walked to the window.

"The murderer's got a lot on his side. Vic was almost unbearable sometimes, and I know he was in a vile mood that night, underneath the mellowness. But all that time—that should've been long enough for anyone to get a better hold of himself.

"Turvey thought poor Vic was a trainee, he sounded so nervous and scared. I've never heard Vic sound nervous of anything, not all the years I've known him, so he must have been feeling half dead with fright. The murderer ought to have seen that, and he should have packed it in then—not mowed him down like a rabbit coming out of the last square yard of corn in reaping time. That wasn't manslaughter, Inspector, that was murder. Wicked, deliberate murder—it's like a nightmare."

"Yes," said Inspector Baker, slowly. "Like a nightmare. You picture it very vividly."

He suppressed a weak, humanitarian scruple, swung round on the dead man's troubled friend and demanded brutally, "Were you there?"

CHAPTER TEN

THERE WAS SOMETHING RATHER MARKED, THE FAR FROM SLOW-witted Sir Wenceslas decided, about the way the young Cartwright twins kept plying Sergeant Hughes with more toast and coffee. Sir Wenceslas, wise in the thought processes of boys of nineteen in the presence of Air Marshals, squadron leaders and even, perhaps, chief inspectors, thought that there might be some valuable piece of information being saved for the less awe-inspiring C.I.D. sergeant.

Dutifully forgoing the leisurely last cup of coffee he had been planning, he clapped his neighbour, Titus Oates, on the shoulder and proposed, "It seems rather a better morning today, Titus. Do you think a turn round the lawn might do anything for our middle-aged spread?"

The wishes of Air Marshals being, to Titus, commands, the security officer rose obediently.

"Noel?" invited Sir Wenceslas negligently.

The physicist's intelligent red-brown eyes slanted a comprehending glance at the two pilot officers and the apparently unsuspecting police sergeant, but he shook his head. Sir Wenceslas, piloting Titus towards the French windows which led to the lawn, wondered exasperatedly whether his civilian colleague was again being deliberately obstructive or whether the egalitarian Noel was already in the Cartwrights' confidence.

Hardly had the windows closed behind him than his manoeuvre succeeded. But its result was one for which he might have considered his cup of coffee hard-sacrificed.

"Do tell us, Sergeant," beseeched Laetitia Osborne, her sloe

eyes dancing; "we've all been dying to get you by yourself. What's Scotland Yard's professional opinion of Titus as a sleuth?"

Sergeant Hughes, who, like Sir Wenceslas, had been expecting something considerably more momentous than this, was taken aback.

"He's—er—very thorough," he stammered diplomatically.

"Yes. We can see that for ourselves," agreed Sir Noel, most embarrassingly. "But a very thorough what—that's what we want to know. Do you find all these old broom-handles he keeps pressing on you an almighty distraction from getting on with the job, or are they really any good?"

Sergeant Hughes, who had noticed two ominously blurred patches on the varnished handle of the bumper, had no longer much faith in the help that might be gained from that; but he thought it would do the Little Eva inventor no harm to take the station security more seriously.

"Quite possibly, sir, a great deal of good," he said primly. "We've got clear photographs of our fingerprints tests on that bumper. They may or may not yield significant information, but they certainly couldn't have done, if Squadron Leader Maltby-Oafes hadn't preserved them."

Pip Cartwright put his head on one side.

"What happens," he inquired delicately, "if they don't yield significant information? That, I take it, is a euphemism for yielding someone else's fingerprints on top of the lot I left the previous afternoon?"

Sergeant Hughes nodded.

"Well, what if there aren't any? Will the general attitude be 'Ah, pity, the murderer must have got down on hands and knees with a duster', or will be it 'Sinister, my dear Watson; let us arrest Cartwright Mark Two forthwith'?"

The Scotland Yard man laughed.

"You being Cartwright Mark Two?"

"I don't think I'll answer that without consulting my

solicitor. If there's any question of arresting a Cartwright, you have to toss up for it, and then the other one pops up like Sidney Carton and confuses the jury."

"I shouldn't worry," Sergeant Hughes reassured him. "Fingerprints on the bumper, even someone's overlaying yours, probably wouldn't be enough by themselves to justify an arrest forthwith. If there are no marks overlaying yours, that certainly wouldn't. Quite apart from the hands-and-knees possibility, there's also the chance the murderer might have handled the bumper in gloves, or with a cloth round the handle."

The Cartwright twins looked at each other, and Jo turned to the policeman.

"Come to think of it," he declared intelligently if paradoxically, "that's what he did do, isn't it? Those photographs we printed—there were two distinct blurs on that bumper-handle."

Sergeant Hughes reflected wryly on the drawbacks of a system which allowed half the suspects such a detailed view of the fingerprint evidence.

"That may be where Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates handled it when he locked it up," he said non-committally. "He held it in a duster then."

"Yes, but he carted it off very gingerly, by its uttermost, extreme tip," Noel disillusioned him with relish. "I watched him take it into custody. It was like someone arresting a lavatory brush. A wet one."

"Thank you, Noel. Some of us are still eating," his wife reproved him.

"Then some of us shouldn't be, or we'll be having to join Good King Wenceslas's slimming school on the lawn!"

Laetitia grimaced at him, and Jo Cartwright turned back to the fingerprint topic, a little uneasily.

"Suppose you *don't* get any evidence out of the Block, though? We've been wondering—I hope you don't mind my

asking—exactly how you do set about getting evidence when there obviously isn't going to be much evidence left for you to get. One reads these ominous little paragraphs in the papers, about 'A man was taken to the police station and questioned for ten hours before being released'. Will you have to do that to all of us? Or is that only when you know a man's guilty, but you can't pin it on him unless he breaks down and confesses?"

Sergeant Hughes lifted a deprecatory hand.

"There's no need for any gloomy talk like that, Mr. Cartwright. It's early days yet to say there's not much evidence. Our man may flatter himself, he's got clean away and cleared everything up, but you'd be surprised what people can overlook at a time like that. And there are other lines of inquiry, too, that can pin him down without the need for any ten-hour questioning sessions."

"Such as what?"

Sergeant Hughes looked round the room.

"Well, for one thing, the time of the murder. From one point of view, four minutes to two was a very sensible time to choose; much more sensible than doing it earlier in the evening, when the wing commander might have been missed within a few minutes of the shot, and there'd be no time to clear anything up. But from another point of view, it may give us a direct pointer. You see, it's rather an extraordinary time of night for the wing commander to wait for, isn't it? After all, he arrived on the island soon after seven. What made him wait until that hour before going over to your Ops Block? Why didn't he do what he and Squadron Leader Merlin originally intended, and go over as soon as dinner was finished? Was it just chance that he got interested in the television programme and then stayed on for so long chatting by the fire? Or was someone delaying him on purpose?"

Pip Cartwright whistled.

"Yes, by odzookens, you've got something there! You

mean, the murderer was deliberately trying to put him off taking the papers over until he could sit everyone else out, and get a chance of cornering Swanton alone?"

"Something like that," agreed Sergeant Hughes.

"Oh no. I don't think so. I think he only got casually distracted," reflected Pip. "You see, it was raining hard and blowing a gale, and I think his idea was it might let up later on. But no one was deliberately detaining him, except himself. As a matter of fact, I did ask him myself if he'd like me to take the documents over for him earlier on—I was the duty officer that night—but he said no, he'd wait and see what the weather did, because he might take a look at Noel's new modifications at the same time."

The young pilot officer's face suddenly flooded with colour, and he halted abruptly. Sergeant Hughes eyed him curiously, and asked "Well, Mr. Cartwright?"

"That's all," mumbled Pip.

"No, it's not." The precise, dispassionate voice of Dougal Macleod contradicted him. "It was not Wing Commander Swanton who stopped Pip taking the documents over after dinner," he told the C.I.D. man.

"Who was it?" demanded Sergeant Hughes.

Pip kept silent, but Dougal said inexorably, "It was the C.O.'s own orders we'd to tell the police anything significant, Pip. It was Squadron Leader Merlin stopped him, Sergeant."

"You nasty little Boy Scout, Dougal," Laetitia Osborne exclaimed angrily. "What an unnecessary sense of duty you've got, to be sure! You know perfectly well poor Wiz wasn't doing any deliberate detaining. All it was," she assured the sergeant, "was that Squadron Leader Merlin was dying to get the wing commander's nose to the grindstone and show off the new modifications, and he didn't want him settling himself in the Mess for the evening. He was nagging away at the poor man to come on over to the Folly even before they'd had time to finish their coffee. Then he kept on and on like a

perfect menace all through the television show, about not thinking much of this for a programme and shouldn't they take the documents over now, until Victor had to tell him straight out to stop pestering."

"That's perfectly true," confirmed Bob Ames, with a grin. "Our C.O.'s a frantically keen type," he explained to Sergeant Hughes, "and he'd far rather waste an evening peering at a radar tube than a television tube any day of the week. No one was detaining anyone on purpose. It was Swanton's own idea to stop and see the end of the television play."

"But what happened when the television closed down, sir?" asked Sergeant Hughes. "Can you remember that? Did you all just drift haphazardly into the fireside conversation, or do you think anyone was particularly trying to keep the party going?"

He saw the corners of Noel Osborne's mouth twitch, in what might have been nervousness or mockery.

"I think it was probably me who stoked the fires of discussion," he announced blandly. He paused, and then asked extremely politely, "Do you want to make something of it?"

Sergeant Hughes considered him, not sure if he was clowning or serious. Noel looked as if he were not quite sure himself.

"Of course he doesn't want to make something of it, Noel. How bad-mannered you are," Laetitia intervened hastily. "He's merely trying to do the job he's here for in the nicest and most courteous way possible, and you're not going much out of your way to help him. The sergeant knows perfectly well that Swanton's threat at dinner-time couldn't have been aimed at you. Poor old Victor had no powers to make *you* wish he'd been drowned, even if he'd wanted to."

There was a ring of anxiety in her voice which told Sergeant Hughes that her intention was to ensure, if he had not known that perfectly well before, that he did now.

"I wouldn't say it was specially you kept things going,

Noel," Bob supported her generously. "My memory is, it was just as much Swanton himself as anyone else. He was just feeling a bit bloody-minded, if you ask me, and he didn't want to indulge Wiz and do what Wiz wanted. Not that my memory goes very far," he admitted ruefully and not entirely ingenuously. "Wiz was quite right about it not being much of a play, and during the evening, one or two of us had been helping it out fairly steadily with the odd noggin. By the time the T.V. closed down, I personally was in a kind of benevolent alcoholic haze, and I couldn't really take an oath on who it was who said anything. But I'm sure there wasn't any delaying going on. You know how it is when you get stuck into a political matter, with a good fire and the bar open. You don't notice how the time's going."

"But you say *you* think you kept it going, sir?" Sergeant Hughes asked Noel.

Noel shrugged.

"Let's put it that Swanton and I were the only two people in that gathering who appreciated what we were really talking about. It was a hoary old argument he and I usually managed to work round to if we had to spend more than an hour or so in each other's company. Apart from the Project, Swanton and I had very little in common."

Noel sounded as if he sincerely congratulated himself on this, and for one moment of revelation, Sergeant Hughes suddenly saw that the civilian physicist had, at the mildest, heartily disliked the Service commander. The observant Noel collected himself, and went on dispassionately, "But one must be polite, of course, and make social conversation. So when we did get thrown together, we used to argue about our common interest—the Project."

"Argue?" inquired Sergeant Hughes.

Noel flashed him a nervous ferret's grin.

"My mistake. Debate. It was all very calm and academic. No inflamed feelings, or anything of that description. It was

also rather remote from the real things we were arguing about. One can't discuss the Project openly over the fire in the Officers' Mess ante-room," he explained, "because you can never be sure who may be overhearing you and one doesn't air one's top-secret troubles before the domestic staff. So we used to have it out in very general terms, about the political international field as a whole."

He hesitated.

"I don't know how much they're letting you in on the Project secrets, Sergeant. But I expect you know roughly what it's for. What we were discussing last night, obliquely, was what we ought to do with it, now we've got it.

"You see, Swanton was one of these people who think the salvation of civilisation depends on having all the nations of the West gang up on all the nations of the East, and overawe them. His viewpoint was that, as the Soviet is so far ahead of America in the development of long-range missiles, the world wasn't safe unless our Project was an international defence for the whole West.

"But *I* hold the view that an all-powerful bully on one side of the Iron Curtain is just as dangerous as an all-powerful bully on the other. *I* think the salvation of civilisation depends at present on neither side feeling free to attack the other, for fear of the other side's reply; and that, until we can make the whole world safe from these appalling weapons of mass destruction, it would be highly dangerous to make only half the world safe. I feel rather strongly on that," he understated, mildly, "because I happen to think that scientists have a personal responsibility over the use politicians make of their discoveries, and that any man with a personal responsibility over the starting of a Third World War will have a dreadful reckoning with his Maker on Judgment Day.

"So that was the discussion. A solemn one," he ended less intensely, "but not an acrimonious one. One doesn't get personally abusive over world-scale problems of that description."

"Indeed, no. It was a most interesting and thought-provoking discussion," Dougal Macleod complimented him approvingly, "and, to those prepared to devote a little serious, intelligent attention to it"—the teetotal Dougal shot a critical glance at Bob Ames and the Cartwright twins—"it was a great privilege to be allowed to hear. I found both you and Wing Commander Swanton had entirely tenable points of view, Sir Noel."

"Thank you, Dougal. That's most encouraging."

"You may laugh," Dougal told him, "but you shouldn't really, you know. After all, it's the minds of people like me that you and the wingco have to convince. The present generation—it's the way we see these things that's going to save civilisation or otherwise."

Noel, who was not yet forty, slumped back in admiring defeat.

"I stand corrected. But you shouldn't disillusion me, Dougal. I thought *I* was the present generation."

"Oh, you are. It doesn't depend on your calendar age," Jo Cartwright hastened to comfort him, entirely innocent of irony. "It's how much alive you still are, and how much original thinking you've still got to contribute to society. Just compare yourself to Titus and Good King Wenceslas, and you'll see what I mean."

As Good King Wenceslas was getting on for sixty, and Noel considered Titus a bad case of premature senility, he did not find this an altogether felicitous comparison.

"You should join the police, sir. Then you've always got your pension to look forward to," sympathised Sergeant Hughes with a straight face. Noel grinned, and Dougal looked as if he thought this was a very sensible and philosophical approach to old age, but the more intelligent Jo Cartwright turned to Laetitia and complained, "Mum, Mum, they're laughing at us!"

"Not really," contradicted Noel, ruefully. "There's such a horrible possibility you may be right."

"Still, whoever kept that argument going, it was nothing to do with Wiz," said Laetitia, reverting to the original inquiry. "In fact, Wiz was rather annoyed about it, if anything. You see, when the television closed down," she told the sergeant, "these two bigoted teetotallers here, Noel and Dougal, decided it was time someone fed and watered them on something non-alcoholic. And as there isn't a Mess staff on after dinner, Squadron Leader Merlin and I went on a forage to the kitchen to see what we could rustle up. The cook leaves sandwiches ready, and the tea-tray all set and just waiting for the water to boil, so you can see it didn't take us long. But when we got back, this N.A.T.O. argument was already in full swing and quite obviously booked to go on into the small hours. Wiz, who was still raring to go and show Victor Swanton all the technical fun-and-games in the Folly, didn't do any prolonging at all. In fact, he turned quite sulky, for him, and went off to bed with a slight case of huff."

She laughed.

"Not that I blamed Victor Swanton for procrastinating. You could see his idea was just to shove his little secrets under safe lock and key, and not do any more work after that. He'd already put in a full day's stint at Ramswell before he got here, and he didn't see why he should have to turn to and be intelligent about Noel's boffinry at that hour."

"So Squadron Leader Merlin was in bed," said Sergeant Hughes. "Well, that's one stage further. That's one person at least who'd have no opportunity of knowing who'd eventually take those documents over, the wing commander or the duty officer."

Pip grinned.

"He'd have a fairly shrewd idea it wouldn't be the duty officer. I was in much the same state as Bob when Wiz went to bed—a benevolent alcoholic haze. I did offer again about taking the papers over when the party broke up—I'm like Dougal, I've got an unnecessary sense of duty—but old

Swanton very wisely declined. He was getting a bit benevolent himself by then, I think. He patted me rather more affectionately than usual on the head, and said something quite human about 'Not on your life, my lad. I've signed for all these, and if you drop any on the way over, I get the court martial. And you'd all hate anything like that to happen to me, wouldn't you?' Poor old Swanton!" reflected the young pilot officer, more soberly "Looking back on that, I suppose he must have known then someone had it in for him."

"Yes." And that someone was not, Sergeant Hughes noted mentally, Swanton's professional rival the island sub-commander, who was by then out of the gibe's way, in bed.

"Who was still up by then?" he asked.

"All of us, except Wiz. Jo and I, Noel and Laetitia, Bob, Dougal and," Pip hesitated, "Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates."

Bob Ames intervened, looking a little ashamed of himself, "I think you and the Chief Inspector should know, Sergeant, while we're on that subject, that some of us don't agree with Squadron Leader Merlin about that cable disconnection being beyond the technical powers of Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates. He's the security officer, after all, and telephone communications are an essential part of any station's security. I don't suggest that he definitely does know the layout, but he might quite easily have made it his duty to familiarise himself with it, as part of his ordinary duties."

Noel Osborne, remembering his own undignified squabble with Titus over the information that "Topsy" was a station called Turvey, suddenly saw that this was not true. If Titus had really made himself familiar with the telephone layout, he could not have failed to discover where each of the lines terminated at the other end.

He opened his mouth to pass on this information to the sergeant, and then changed his mind.

"I think it unlikely he knows," he compromised carefully, "but it's a possibility which shouldn't altogether be ignored."

Sergeant Hughes gave no personal opinion. He did not often indulge in jumping to conclusions, but he had seen enough of Titus in the Operations Room the previous evening to have no illusions about the security squadron leader's technical capabilities. He had seen enough of Noel now, too, to have more than a vague suspicion that Noel would have no illusions either, and he thought this opened up possibilities which shouldn't altogether be ignored, as well.

"Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates is another person who's not likely to be the target for that threat about wishing the wing commander had been drowned," was all he said.

"You don't know that. There might be family quarrels, as Noel so rightly says. And there's money, too," pointed out Dougal Macleod in his oddly impersonal way. "Titus Oates has three children, two at a public school and a third getting ready for it. That can't be easy on a squadron leader's pay. And Titus is married to Swanton's only sister, and there's a very old father still alive. With Swanton out of the way, there might be more of a legacy for the sister. The father can't be expected to live much longer, I know, because Titus mentioned himself that the news of this murder might kill him."

This callous and calculating motive for what would be effectively a double murder was too much for Bob Ames's conscience.

"Heavens, no one's trying to suggest poor old Titus'd do anything of that sort," he protested, shocked. "I merely suggest he's as likely to be responsible as any of the rest of us."

Dougal looked across at him, his hazel eyes friendly, honest and inoffensive.

"As a matter of fact, Bob," he said shatteringly, "you know, that original remark about being afraid the boat had got sunk on the way over came from you. I'd have thought the likeliest thing was that his remark back again was meant for you, too. That was certainly how it seemed to me at the time, anyway."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MERCILESS DIRECTNESS OF INSPECTOR BAKER'S QUESTION caught Merlin like a physical blow, and took his breath away. He swayed and half-collapsed on to the edge of the desk, looking thoroughly frightened. •

"No, of course, I wasn't there," he gasped indignantly, when he could speak. He recovered his spirit and added, "If I had been, do you think I'd calmly stand here now and tell you all about it?"

"A great many people do," Inspector Baker informed him, unmoved. "Confession's supposed to be good for the soul, and a lot of people don't seem to be able to help themselves. I just wondered."

"I was trying to help you," said Merlin. "You mayn't realise it, Inspector, but this business is something a good deal more serious than merely the murder, dreadful though that may be by itself. This could badly retard the whole Project, I'm doing my best to help you clear it up before it can do anything in that direction."

His tone was fervent, and again Inspector Baker had the odd feeling that Merlin regarded the presence of a murdered man in his Operations Block as an outrage far more against the Block than the murdered man.

"All that flap about espionage yesterday," said Merlin, seriously. "That's terribly dangerous. St. Swithin's is only the prototype unit for a vast major defence programme, you know, Inspector. There are plans going forward now for a whole chain of Little Evas, right round every coast of the

British Isles, and to my mind the sooner the whole chain's in being, the better for all of us. Any doubts about whether the security's still good might hold up those plans for months."

His naturally carefree features turned haggard at the thought of his responsibilities.

"I've got to do as much as I can to help you clear this up," he said earnestly. "But that doesn't mean you need go suggesting I'm talking from inside knowledge. I promise you," his voice shook, "I'll take any oath you like I didn't have anything to do with it. On my word of honour."

"Well, don't get alarmed," Inspector Baker advised him, unruffled. "If you didn't, there's nothing to worry you, is there? We shall find the man who did. In the meantime, have you any suggestions where we might start looking?"

Merlin lifted his head with a shameful eagerness, opened his mouth and then closed it and shook his head.

"No, 1984!" he reminded himself, elliptically. "You aren't going to make me do that. It could probably equally well be any of us."

He seated himself more easily on the edge of the desk.

"Have you any idea what life in this place is like?" he demanded. "It's almost a desert island. We do get ashore to the great big world at Yewmouth at regular intervals, admitted, but it's a pretty restricted existence nevertheless. We mustn't get more than superficially involved with Yewmouth's social whirl, such as it is, because of the security position and keeping up this bird-watching legend. Even the domestic staff can't really relax when they're ashore. As for the Ops crews—well, we can go to a dance, but it's not done to dance more than three dances with one girl, and we can go to a pub but it's not safe to drink with any strangers. We can make acquaintances, but we mustn't really know anyone. That sort of thing gives you a very dreadful feeling of all living close on top of each other, with the knowledge that for another

twelve months at least, there's not much chance of any of us getting away from anyone else."

He smiled.

The Project doesn't help much, either. Ninety per cent of the time, it's the most wonderful thing in the world, and we're the pioneers of a new era of safety and security for the whole world. But, like everything else, it has its off moments when everything goes wrong, and the types on the Uncle Tom side put up some clever bit of boffinry that utterly beats Little Eva. Then we get to feeling we're wasting the best years of our lives on a stark and useless experiment, and we'll never catch up with the lost years. It's at times like that," he added bitterly, "that people like Titus Oates usually weigh in with remarks like that one about the floor-polishing."

Inspector Baker laughed, and Merlin, encouraged, laughed too.

"I sound very sorry for myself, don't I? I'm not really. We know we're making history here—in fact, we all think we're probably preserving history—and if Good King Wenceslas decides to lift the smokescreen for you and give you a Cook's Tour of Little Eva on the job, you'll go straight home and dust off that old Union Jack in the attic. But you see what I'm getting at? In conditions like this, people can't help getting a bit restive and hard to handle at times. It happens to all of us. Fortunately, it doesn't happen to all of us at the same time, and so far we've managed to help each other through at those periods without landing for any real trouble. But there've been occasions when each one of us has stepped fairly heavily out of line. Being as bad as the rest of them myself, I don't make a practice of coming down on anyone too hard when that happens. But Swanton, partly because he's never been on the island chain-gang, and partly," said Merlin honestly, "because he was naturally better behaved than I am and had less sympathy, used to land out pretty heavily. I could dredge up instances for every one of us which might

leave someone with ill-feeling against Swanton. But I'm not going into a lot of individual muck-raking for you."

He lowered his head.

"Particularly," he added half inaudibly, "as I don't know anything about anyone else that might cause you half so much interest as some of the things I know against myself. And those I certainly don't propose to list in detail for you."

Inspector Baker studied him gravely.

"Tell me," he asked. "You said earlier you thought Swanton's threat at the dinner table was aimed at you. Why? Had you any specific reason, or just a general feeling?"

Merlin raised his eyes.

"I could see he was seething at me," he acknowledged simply. "I suppose I might as well tell you that, because I expect everybody else could see it too."

"Nobody's mentioned it, if so," the inspector told him. "Are you sure it was you he was seething at?"

Merlin nodded.

"Yes, it was me. I knew Victor. That was one reason I didn't propose getting involved in any political arguments with him. Ordinarily, he was very correct to me before the others. He was the Project Commander and I was O.C. St. Swithin's, and he treated me like a brother in public, whatever he was behaving like in private. His control was usually perfect, and he could turn himself on and off like a tap. But this time, he was so furious he could hardly bring himself to talk to me at all, and once or twice when he did say anything to me, he was very nearly downright abusive. I thought someone'd have been bound to notice."

"Otherwise," queried the inspector gently, "you wouldn't have brought it up?"

"Not after what you asked me just now," answered Merlin reproachfully.

"Try to get over that. The only reason it need worry you

would be if you'd had to answer it 'Yes'. Seeing you didn't, there oughtn't to be any harm done."

Merlin got up and walked to the window.

"I've seen how it left him," he brought out, almost in a whimper. "Don't forget that. It was a horrible thing to suggest I'd done that."

"Well, I'm sorry. I don't enjoy asking these things either. But there may have to be several unpleasant questions before we're through." He looked at the sub-commander curiously. "Have you any idea," he asked, "why Wing Commander Swanton should have been 'seething at you'?"

Merlin shifted his weight from one large foot to the other, and looked extremely uncomfortable.

"There'd been a little trouble over Lady Laetitia Osborne's permit to come to the island," he offered, after a noticeable hesitation. "I apparently ought to have consulted Ramswell before I accepted it, but I didn't."

Inspector Baker raised a politely incredulous eyebrow.

"Oh, come, Squadron Leader Merlin, you're not seriously suggesting your Project Commander had such a passion for the formalities that he'd cease being on speaking terms with you for *that*?"

A slightly foolish grin crept into Merlin's face.

"No," he admitted. "Not by itself. There were other things leading up to it as well."

"Such as what?"

"I'm ashamed to tell you now, in the face of this tragedy. It looks so petty. But I'd been playing a rather childish trick on Swanton over the past few weeks, and he was a little put out about that, too."

"What was it?" reiterated the inspector, patiently.

"It was in response to an equally childish trick Victor Swanton and Titus Oates had played on me. At Ramswell, you see, they're always rather too keen to try and catch St. Swithin's bending, and about ten weeks ago, Victor and Titus

tried out a very stupid caper on my guard-room. They came to the island one day with a forged pass, which Vic handed in at the landing-stage instead of his own, to see if the S.P. would spot it. It looked just like the real thing, and it had Victor's photograph and his right pass-number, but instead of his own signature, he'd signed it Kruschev. It was a damned silly way of making a test," criticised Merlin sensibly, "because of course by now the guards pass people like the Project Commander on their faces. They don't look at their passes. But it doesn't mean to say, just because Victor could get by on a forgery, any perfect stranger could."

He shrugged.

"Anyway, there it was. The poor old S.P. had to be clapped on a charge, which I thought was also a bit silly, so I didn't behead him or lop off his ear. I think I confined him to camp for a few days, and Victor took rather a pale view of that, so I got an ear lopped off instead. Altogether, one way and another, I landed a bucket of trouble over it, and I suppose I got a bit Bolshie. I was having a moan about it to myself, and telling myself—you know the way one does—that anyway, I betted no one at Ramswell looked at our operational returns properly either, when it struck me it'd be rather fun to have a test about that, as well."

He looked at the inspector even more foolishly.

"I send a weekly operations report to Air Ministry, copy to Ramswell," he explained, "and it's got a technical section, full of very obscure measurements of various little things. I've always thought they must be absolute nonsense to anyone who's not a practical mechanic, and it's a complete waste of time sending them up to laymen like Victor Swanton and Sir Wenceslas Jones. Still, we do send them, and they always crib like hell if the report gets there even half a day late. So I thought I'd insert a likely-sounding nonsense-measurement, right in the middle of the most obscure readings, just to see how long it took anyone to ask what it was.

"That was in July, and it's now October. And, all that time, I've been religiously putting in the report a line of complete gibberish which says 'Q Cam correction factor—2.736'. Some weeks, to make it more interesting, I juggle the decimal point around, and make it 273.6, in the hopes someone might write in to find out why it's suddenly increased a hundredfold. But nothing ever happened at all, until a few days ago, when Victor was up at Whitehall and Air Commodore Routledge asked him, 'By the way, what's a Q Cam?' And Victor, from what I gathered obliquely from him, didn't quite have the moral courage to say 'I haven't the first idea'."

In spite of the tragedy, he could not resist another little grin, this time of triumph.

"So he told him, 'I forget the exact details, but I'll check up and let you know,' all brisk and efficient. So he did check up, that evening before the murder, and I had to tell him the hideous truth. It didn't go down at all well."

He eyed the inspector anxiously.

"But that was a calculated risk, you can appreciate that? I mean, I knew when I first brought the Q Cam into existence there'd be a few hard words when it all came to light, but I reckoned it was worth it for the giggle. If I'd been so scared of the consequences I'd let them drive me to murder, I wouldn't have gone into it in the first place."

"No, that's reasonable enough," agreed the inspector. He regarded the delinquent sub-commander with a faint grin of his own, and then asked, "Do you really mean to tell me that's the gravest offence you can produce between the five of you?"

Merlin met his gaze honestly.

"Look here, Inspector, you're making things very difficult for me. I told you—I could produce something bad against practically everyone, if I delved around for it. But you must realise, they're all friends of mine. I really don't feel I can start weighing them up one against the other. Naturally, I've got my own opinions as to which of them are more likely to

be responsible than others, but I might be quite wrong over that. I'd much rather you sorted it out from scratch by yourself. After all, it shouldn't be too hard. There are only five of us—or six, if you count Noel Osborne. Noel used to quarrel pretty fiercely with Victor over some things."

Inspector Baker nodded.

"Very well. I can understand how you feel."

Merlin turned suddenly self-conscious.

"And while you're at it," he instructed the C.I.D. man with a belated and awkward trace of authority, "just be a bit careful how you pull those shock tactics of yours. It's all right to jump me. I can take it. But you ought to remember, we're not as used to murders as you are, and some of my controllers are hardly out of rompers yet. They may seem all very bright and breezy on the surface, but we're all rather shaken up underneath, so don't be too brutal. If you throw a question like that one you gave me at young Jo Cartwright, for instance, you might give him a heart attack."

A lighter thought struck him, and he became less magisterial.

"And you want to watch yourself with Noel Osborne, too," he advised him solicitously, "or you might get the heart attack yourself. Noel disapproves of policemen on principle, and if you start making these third-degree insinuations at Noel, you'd better make sure there's no third witness, or you're liable to get yourself sued for slander."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THERE WERE SEVERAL TEA-LEAVES FLOATING OMINOUSLY ON the tea Pip Cartwright poured for himself and his fellow-members of the Little Eva stand-by crew in the Ops Office. Bob Ames looked up from the letter Pip had brought him from the mail delivery at the house, and gave a snort of disgust.

"The water wasn't boiling! Christ, hasn't anyone even succeeded in teaching you kids how to make a decent cup of tea yet?"

He slid from his chair, pushed with an impatience almost amounting to an assault past Dougal Macleod and quitted the office, slamming the door. A moment later, his three juniors heard a second door slam.

"Where's he chased off to?" asked Jo Cartwright indulgently. "Gone to bind at old Noel about what the present generation's coming to?" He glanced wickedly at Dougal as he said this, and Dougal ran a suffering hand through his sandy hair.

"I don't know. But it doesn't look too good for me from now onwards, does it? I'm booked for a terrible day."

Dougal's own idea for his programme of work that day had been for a useful session assisting Noel in his important experimental modifications, in the absence at Ramswell of the senior technician Wiz Merlin. Merlin, though, had produced a different idea. He was not without his own standards and methods of discipline, and before leaving the island he had given detailed instructions for the occupation of his junior technical officer's time. Instead of allowing Noel the benefit of

Dougal's collaboration, the sub-commander had ruled that for Dougal and Bob Ames the day should be spent in a mutual exchange of each other's especial skills. Dougal was to instruct Bob in the art of disconnecting telephone cables in preparation for major maintenance, in return for which the deputy chief controller was afterwards to initiate Dougal into the mysteries of the photographic dark-room.

"Which is a stupid arrangement all round," Dougal criticised the absent squadron leader ungratefully. "because it just gets everyone under everyone else's feet, and makes for an awful amount of bad temper. Whoever heard of trying to do major maintenance on one channel when there's a boffin swarming all over the channel next door to it? You know what Noel is at the best of times. He butts in whatever you're doing to ask you to do something else, and he asks in such a complicated way you can't possibly follow him. Then if you don't start off and do it straight away, he throws something at you. As for Bob—well, I don't know what's come over Bob Ames these days. He used to be quite a good type, but just lately he's getting almost unendurable."

"Night starvation," diagnosed Pip wisely. "That's the absolute classic symptom. We ought to put him on a course of that drink, and then in three months Good King Wenceslas could promote him the new Project Commander. I wonder how Wiz'd like that."

Dougal refused to come out of his cloud of depression.

"I don't see why he should always take his night starvation out on me."

"He doesn't, particularly. He's been like that with all of us lately, even Wiz. Naturally, though, he's a bit narked with you this morning, Douggie," Jo reproved him, drinking down the non-boiling tea with every appearance of enjoyment. "Who wouldn't be, after you went and told Taffy-the-Search-Warrant it was Bob old Swanton was after?"

"Well, I think it was."

Jo and Pip exchanged long-suffering glances.

"My dear old half-wit, so do we think it was," Jo informed him gently. "We've known that all along, but that isn't the sort of thing you go telling policemen, clot."

Dougal's hazel eyes rounded.

"But why not? You heard what Wiz told us. It's our duty."

Pip gave a long and patient sigh.

"Don't be naïve, Dougie. You don't think Wiz meant any of that? He was just making noises like a squadron leader. Being C.O. of the joint, he has to do that occasionally, but that doesn't mean you have to take any notice."

"You never disputed it with him at the time."

"Well, of course I didn't. That comes under conduct prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline, and it's as embarrassing as it's unprofitable. And of course, in strict theory, the old man was right. One should be under a bounden duty to spill everything one knows to the police. But in practice, why the hell should one? Swanton's dead now, and hanging someone else isn't going to restore him to life. And it's not as if there's anything else to be gained from it. This isn't the kind of murder that'll be repeated if no one's arrested. None of us are the sort of people who'd go casually banging off at an unarmed man without a tremendous amount of provocation, so the only conclusion to draw is that Swanton must have damned well asked for it."

Dougal looked horrified, and Jo endorsed, "Well, you know yourself how one felt when he really got going on one. This time, he must have pushed someone that tiny bit over the border. Personally, I'm very sorry, and I think the Project's lost a great man for probably no real reason at all. But that's no justification for losing another one, and I bet Swanton'd be the first to agree about that. He was a highly rational character. He'd quite see there's nothing to be gained by hanging someone for something which must have been more than half his own fault."

"No, that's entirely a false way to look at it." Dougal found his tongue. "This is a terrible crime and the murderer must be brought to justice. If there are extenuating circumstances, well and good. No doubt the judge and jury can take that into account and recommend him to mercy. But it's not up to you and me to judge the rights and wrongs of it. We've got to do all we can to bring him to account. It's not fair to Wing Commander Swanton just to sit around saying we're sorry he's dead. I expect everyone's sorry about that, even the murderer."

"Don't you believe it," contradicted Jo. "I know several who aren't."

Dougal's eyes opened so wide they looked in danger of falling right out of his head.

"Who?"

"Wiz isn't, for one. And I'm not sure Bob Ames is, either. And as for old Noel, he isn't even pretending to be, except occasionally for politeness, when Titus is around. He's just darned annoyed this has cropped up to interfere with his mods programme, and hoping it won't be a drag to the progress of the new chain of stations. He'd no time for Swanton personally at all."

"Oh, I don't agree. And as for Wiz, I think Wiz is very sorry. He looks ill with it."

"Not with that. We've seen Wiz when he's really very sorry, and he's not like he is now. Don't you remember when the patrol dog blew herself up chasing squirrels into the mine-fields and the S.P. had to shoot her? We had to hold Wiz back practically by main force from charging out to fetch her back and try and save her life. He was as near as damn-it in tears in front of all the S.P.s and everyone. Wiz is as soft as butter when he's really grieved. But now, he's quite remote and hard. He's sorry all right, but it isn't about Swanton. He's sorry about Wiz Merlin—sorry the policemen might think he did the shooting himself, and even sorrier, I think, that he

can't be decently sorry for Swanton like a Christian. But have you once heard him say he's sorry about Swanton himself, even to Titus."

"No." Dougal's voice was awed. "Now you mention it, I don't think I have."

"No, and you won't, either, because he's not. And he's not dishonest enough to say he is when he isn't."

"But you can't mean that Wiz—this'd never be Wiz," declared the ingenuous Dougal. "Wiz and Swanton were the best of friends. Why should Wiz do it?"

Pip sighed again.

"Who suggested for a moment Wiz did do it? In fact, can you see our kind and gentle brother Wiz taking a pistol to any man or beast, in any circumstances? And if he had—if he'd really lost his temper at last and mowed Swanton down like I reckon Swanton's been begging him to for months, do you think he'd be going around next day not sorry for it? He'd be so sorry he'd have gone straight after him with the next bullet in the canister, to apologise and make friends again."

At this gruesome conception, Dougal grimaced, but looked reassured.

"But for all that," Jo pointed out, "and for all the high-minded orders of O.C. St. Swithin's, last night, have you noticed Wiz personally falling over himself to give the police a hand?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think of this. That threat of Swanton's at dinner—you thought that was aimed at Bob. So did Pip and I. So did Bob, obviously, or he wouldn't have got so annoyed at you telling the police."

Dougal turned pop-eyed again.

"So the odds are Wiz thought so too. And Bob, as we all know, has been dragging out some private feud with Swanton for weeks now. It's probably something quite piffling and non-murderous, but at least it's been enough to take Bob to

Ramswell twice on mysterious interviews, and bring him back glowering to have his brow soothed by Wiz. Wiz, presumably, would know exactly what he was having to be soothing about, because Bob would go through him in the first place. And it's something a bit on the delicate side, because neither of them ever breathe a word about it in front of any of us."

Dougal nodded.

"Well, we don't know how the police set about these things. But one would expect the first thing they'd say when Wiz offered them a black list of six suspects would be, 'Thank you so much, old boy, and is there anyone on this menu you can particularly recommend? And then Wiz, if he were all public-dutiful like he makes out, would say, 'Yes, I'm afraid there is. There's this character Ames,' and tell them all about it. Then they'd start in on one of those ten-hour questioning sessions with Bob forthwith."

"Whereas what actually happened," Pip reminded the troubled Dougal cheerfully, "was that when Bob, naturally a trifle scared of how much Wiz knows about him, asked 'Did you specify any particular Ops officer?' Wiz got quite hurt and annoyed, and said 'Of course not'. Whatever Wiz preaches, he wouldn't dream of turning coppers' nark himself, and I don't think he really expects us to, either."

"But what if Bob genuinely did it?"

"He almost certainly did," rejoined Pip calmly. "But so what? Who's any better off if he hangs for it?"

Dougal put down his mug of tea, and stared at him, flabbergasted.

"Don't look like that. It more or less has to be Bob. Hadn't your master-mind got round to that yet? Unless it's you," qualified Jo, amiably.

"Certainly not, it's not me," spluttered the Hebridean.

"No, we didn't reckon it would be. If it was, with your strict Manse upbringing, you'd be standing in a white sheet by the market cross by now, making a perfect nuisance of

yourself confessing it to every passing wedding-guest, like the Ancient Mariner. And we've agreed it's not Wiz. And I swear it's not Titus, either. Bob can tell what yarns he likes to the police and we're not going to contradict him, but Titus'd never dare poke his busy little fingers in among all those feeder lines to disconnect the cable, even if he knew how. He's absolutely terrified of the Little Eva sets. You've seen him in the Ops Room when we're on the air, Douggie. He's like the priest and the Levite—he looks on it and when he sees it, he passes by on the other side."

"With his legs crossed," added Pip, with graphic vulgarity.

Jo glanced at the flimsy asbestos wall dividing the office from the Operations Room, and lowered his voice discreetly.

"So that only leaves Bob—or one other remote but intriguing possibility."

"Not Noel?" breathed Dougal, as if even to suspect a knight of the realm, with the status of an Air Vice-Marshal, were akin to blasphemy.

Pip nodded.

"Jo and I have worked out a beautiful case against Noel. Not a very convincing one," he admitted regretfully, "but it's just feasible, and it saves having to be quite, quite certain about poor old Bob. You remember when Swanton and Titus first got here, and found Laetitia draped tastefully all round the ante-room?"

"Yes."

"Well, not very much was said directly to her, as you know. But as soon as the Ramswell gang got Wiz cornered by himself in Wiz's admin. office, the balloon really went up. I was right in the middle of it, in my capacity as duty officer, because I was there waiting to book out the Ops Block keys to them. But Titus was so infuriated, he didn't take in my humble existence at all. He couldn't wait to tear Wiz limb from limb for not querying Laetitia's pass with Ramswell before letting her in. Actually, it was all rather embarrassing," said the

pilot officer, disapprovingly. "One doesn't expect to have to stand by and watch people like Wiz getting beaten about the ears by silly little ticks like Titus and not having the guts to do anything but mumble yes, they're frightfully sorry. If I'd been Wiz, I'd have stood on my dignity and the dignity of whatever V.I.P. signed Laetitia's pass, and told Titus to go to hell. That's what Swanton would have done, too, I believe, because he wasn't saying anything at all. He just stood there laughing his head off at both of them, until he noticed me drinking it all in with avid enjoyment, and gave Titus an Indian sign to stop mauling Wiz about in front of the office boy."

He laughed.

"Well, you know Titus. He's like a second-hand gramophone. He isn't fitted with an automatic cut-out, and he has to wind himself down gradually. So he petered out with some distant rumbling about 'Well, I simply can't think what you were up to, William, not letting me know immediately', and that was really too much for old Swanton. He weighed in with a very coarse laugh and said, 'Can't you, Titus? A lusty young fellow like Wiz and a bored and attractive young wife like Laetitia, and Noel locked up for hours working hard in the Ops Block. I bet I can think, can't I, Wiz?'"

"He was joking, surely?" If Dougal were shocked at the idea of a knight committing murder, he was horrified at the idea of a lady committing anything else.

"Of course he was joking. But you know his deadpan look when he joked. And just at that unfortunate point, the Mess waiter knocked to let us know dinner was ready, and I, like a fool, opened the door to him, while Swanton was still enlarging in clear, bell-like tones on what he thought Wiz would be up to with Laetitia, that he didn't like to let Titus know about immediately. And there, in the hall behind the waiter, with a faraway expression and a dripping wet raincoat, stood Noel. So a horrible silence fell over the proceedings, no one being quite sure how much Noel might have heard."

• "And how much had he?"

Pip shrugged.

"*Quién sabe?* Quite probably, he was lost in the mists of some Noel-like hunk of boffinry and not even aware there was a horrible silence in progress. Wiz gave a sickly smile and said 'Hello, Noel, I didn't know you were still hard at work', and that set Swanton off silently laughing himself silly again. Then Titus rallied magnificently and starting beating Noel about the ears as well, demanding to see all Noel's and Laetitia's permits instantly and telling him how horrified everyone was. And Noel, beyond hissing in one of his stage whispers to Wiz 'Has this pestering little nuisance got the right to lead off like this?' was quite conciliatory, and blamed it all on the Earl of Yewmouth."

"But if he *did* hear," pointed out Jo, "that's a very nice motive for Noel to be the murderer. He's completely besotted about Laetitia, and he's got some very unyielding ideas about honour and matters of principle and things. If he thought that was an insult to be avenged in blood, he'd seize the first opportunity to avenge it. He knew Swanton'd be in the Block alone, and he knew that loaded pistol was in the Ops Office. He was grumbling about it being a dangerous thing to have around only the night before. And he could easily have followed Swanton over and surprised him, because he had the spare set of keys to the Block, remember."

Dougal drew a long breath.

"Have you said anything to the police about any of that?"

"Good grief, no! It's only a wild and whirring theory."

The young technical officer looked miserable.

"The fact that Swanton, even in jest, insulted Noel's wife isn't a wild and whirring theory, and neither is the fact that he knew the pistol was there. I think you ought to tell the police, Pip. It's only right. And it's only fair to Bob, seeing what I've told them about that threat being meant for him."

The twins, twin-like, shook their heads in unison and Dougal looked even more miserable.

"If you won't," he announced, "then I must."

"No, you mustn't, Dougie. Really, you mustn't. That was told to you in confidence—just you and us together, scandal-mongering for our own amusement. You mustn't go running to the police with things like that."

Jo stood up, almost as agitated as Dougal, and at that moment the office door opened, to admit an undisguisedly interested Noel Osborne.

"Tea up at long last? Why didn't nobody fetch me?" The tea-leaves on the surface caused Noel no more misgivings than they caused Jo. He helped himself to a mug, and then asked, "What's all the squabbling about? What mustn't you go running to the police with, Dougal? I thought you were the one who didn't have any information to help them."

"It's nothing," stammered Dougal, confused. "Only one or two little things, that is. They probably don't mean anything."

"Then I shouldn't go running to the police with them," advised Noel briskly. "Or, if you do, don't make such a song and dance about it. If your Calvinistic conscience insists on making you a common informer, at least have the sense to be one unobtrusively. We don't want to stumble across a second body lying shot to pieces on the island one of these dark nights."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

INSPECTOR BAKER, AFTER A MORNING ON THE MAINLAND arranging the autopsy and the formal opening of the inquest, returned to the island in mid-afternoon looking depressed.

"I don't think it should take more than a day or two to wrap this up, Shonni," he confided to his sergeant. "This isn't going to be one of our more dodgy investigations, I'm afraid. Murder's traditionally the amateur's crime, and this time I think we've got a particularly unskilled amateur. He can clean up his fingerprints and footprints inside that Operations Block, but I don't think he's going to be able to clean up his own conscience quite so easily. I reckon he'll crack in a day or two."

He did not sound as if he were enjoying the prospect of his early success.

Sergeant Hughes raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"Poor Merlin was horribly seasick this morning, from the moment we cast off to the time we set foot ashore again in Yewmouth," the inspector explained, "and his boat's crew betrayed him most cruelly with kindness. They were extremely concerned on his behalf, because apparently he's never sick as a rule. He's one of the best sailors on the island."

"Well, of course, he mightn't have fancied travelling with his chum's body aboard," suggested Sergeant Hughes, charitably. "Some people have feelings about things like that."

"Possibly. But if Merlin had any feelings, they were feelings of fright that the body might run blood again if anyone made him touch it," growled Inspector Baker, harking back gruesomely to the medieval superstition about murderers and their

victims' corpses. "No, I've seen that sort of collapse before. It was fright and bad conscience that were turning his stomach, and what's more, he could see that I knew that. I couldn't but feel sorry for him, whatever he's done. He was trying all he knew to make the crew leave him alone and not draw attention to him, but he was too far gone to assert himself properly. And, to crown his misery, poor old unsuspecting Titus Oates went fussing over to him as well, like a father, and told him there was no need at all for him to go on to Ramswell if he didn't feel up to it, because Titus was quite sure no one could read anything sinister into it if he stayed away. Poor Merlin had just enough strength left to whisper no, please go away, he'd be perfectly well when we landed and it was only seasickness. And between bouts, he kept watching me like a dying dog, all the way over."

"And was he perfectly well when you landed?"

Inspector Baker smiled.

"Yes, I have to admit he was. Still, it was fairly unmistakable. And there was another unmistakable thing later, after the inquest, when it came to making plans about the funeral. Whatever Titus may say about people not thinking sinister things about Swanton's boyhood companion Master Merlin, I'm afraid there's not much doubt what Mrs. Titus—Swanton's sister—thinks about him. I came up to the house with them to explain about the burial certificate and I heard the whole discussion. Titus was very wisely proposing not to make a ceremonial affair of the funeral, because he thought it'd be an unbearable experience for everybody, having a full-dress parade in the knowledge that the wing commander's murderer must be somewhere among the comrades performing the last honours. He wanted just a quiet family service in private.

"But I could see that was something else Merlin couldn't quite stomach, either. He went off into a corner in conference with himself for a few minutes, and then he came out with a most halting and pathetic obituary eulogy of Swanton, all

about his service to the Royal Air Force and his genius as this Project's commander. 'It wouldn't be right not to give him the full Service honours, after he fought in the war too, remember,' he said, and he proposed they should go ahead with the ceremonial procedure, but that they could confine the St. Swithin's contingent to the domestic staff and the controllers who are away on this General Service Training course.

"Of course, that went down very strong with the family. It's an old Service family, and Swanton's father's a retired group captain himself. And the women always like that kind of thing. So then little Mrs. Swanton, who's a nice, innocent little girl, very grateful to her husband's best friend for all he's doing for them, said, 'But *you'll* come with them, won't you, Wiz?' And Mrs. Titus, in a voice like ice, chipped in, 'I'm sure in all the circumstances, Clare dear, William will quite recognise the propriety of staying away.' And, in all the circumstances, poor William certainly did. He gave me one terrified look to see if I'd hoisted that in, sweated like a bull and stuttered something about not feeling he ought to treat himself any different from the other four Operations officers on the island."

Sergeant Hughes mulled this over.

"Yes," he agreed. "It doesn't look too any good for Merlin, all put together. There's only one thing."

He paused politely.

"Spill it," his superior encouraged him.

"Well, this. If it's Merlin—just Merlin by himself, I mean, because I can't see why he'd need a confederate if *he's* the murderer—what's this other chap going so far out of his way to keep in the limelight for? Sir Noel Osborne?"

"Oh, good lord!" Inspector Baker brushed off Sir Noel Osborne indulgently. "You ought to be able to answer that one by now, Shonni. You've seen plenty like that. Not usually Sir Noel Anybody, admitted, but there's no law limiting that

type of eccentricity to the working classes. 'I see there's a new murder in the papers, Mr. Inspector,'" he mimicked. "'I'd like to confess to it, please. And now can I have my photo on the front page and people paying me the attention I deserve?'"

Sergeant Hughes remained doubtful.

"Not this time, I don't think. After all, Osborne's a leading light in this Project, and he must have a sense of responsibility about it buried somewhere inside him. He wouldn't deliberately set out to hamper a security man without some much better reason than just a yen to get his picture in the papers. I reckon Osborne may have been quite genuinely frightened to let Titus search that bedroom of his, for fear of what he'd find there if he did."

"What—bloodstained clothes, do you think?"

"Bloodstained, or just damp from having had blood washed out of them. And also a pair of wet shoes that oughtn't to have been out in the rain at all that night."

"Osborne was out in the rain coming back from the Block earlier in the evening," Inspector Baker reminded his subordinate. "That'd explain any damp clothes."

Sergeant Hughes said "Ah!" and Inspector Baker suddenly looked very startled.

"You can't mean Lady Laetitia? Surely?" For some reason, he received this idea with a tremendous lack of enthusiasm. "What would Lady Laetitia be doing inside that secret Operations Block in the first place, to get at that pistol and murder the wing commander! I can't quite see the Earl of Yewmouth's daughter in the role of seductive Russian-Red spy, Shonni." He relaxed, and then, tautened again, and asked sharply, "You haven't come across her fingerprints on one of those Little Eva cameras, or anything like that, I hope?"

Sergeant Hughes smothered a perceptive and disrespectful leer.

"No, nothing like that," he said, so soothingly that Inspector Baker felt his colour mounting. "The only prints on the cameras belong, as usual, to the unsinister but most ubiquitous Squadron Leader Merlin. This isn't based on anything definite—merely an odd brain-wave I picked up while I was having a chat to that radar station at Topsy-Turvey this morning."

Inspector Baker looked as if he personally would never have stooped to pick up a brain-wave as low as that one.

"I had a bright idea about Turvey," went on the sergeant, undeterred, "You see, nowadays, the Project doesn't use Turvey any longer as the information centre where they get their warning of any ships or aircraft heading into the Uncle Tom firing area. They keep a couple of Project controllers manning up a special Fire Control Room inside the sector headquarters at Bishop Bradbury for that.

"But the reason they still bother to keep that line between St. Swithin's and Turvey alive is because Merlin and Osborne decided it'd be a good idea to keep in touch with an ordinary radar station, to keep an eye on how much of the Project missiles show up on a conventional radar scanner. They're watching whether odd echoes from those missiles, coupled with the echoes from the sea-marker targets that Uncle Tom fires at, are ever in danger of arousing undue curiosity at Turvey; because, if that happens, that'll be an indication that undue curiosity may also start being aroused at the French radars across the Channel on the Cherbourg peninsular, and it'll be time to up-anchor with Little Eva and move somewhere more isolated."

"So from time to time Merlin stops being a heron-breeder for an afternoon, and drops in on Turvey dressed up like a real squadron leader to spend a couple of sociable hours chatting to the radar crew on duty. He has a look what the scanner shows when Uncle Tom firing's actually in progress, and watches to see whether the personnel are getting anywhere

near the stage of wanting to ask him awkward, intelligent questions. As a result, the Turvey lads know Merlin fairly well by now, and I reckoned they might have been able to recognise his voice, if that was Merlin threatening Swanton in the background that night."

"That was worth a check, certainly," Inspector Baker approved. "There are one or two others they might recognise, too. Young Macleod's got a definite Highland singsong, and as far Sir No-ooo Osborne," he mimicked Noel's near-Cockney unkindly, "there ought to be no mistaking him, among all these officers and gentlemen."

Sergeant Hughes chuckled.

"That's what I had in mind, too, look-you," he exaggerated his own pleasant Welsh lilt. "Something shocking, the way all these foreigners talk, isn't it, bach? But it didn't work. That Turvey sergeant who heard the voice isn't very bright, I'm afraid. He told me helpfully that all officers' voices sound the same to him anyway, and this particular voice was so far away he wouldn't even be able to say for certain whether it was a man's or a woman's."

A great and most unprofessional flood of relief swept over Inspector Baker.

"Yes, but confound it, Shonni, that's only a way of speaking. That doesn't mean he really thought it might've been a woman."

"No," agreed Sergeant Hughes unkindly. "But I did."

"But why, Shonni? I can't think of any circumstances in which Swanton'd allow her into that top-secret building in the first place. I wouldn't put it past that woman to have a midnight assignation with a good-looking wing commander after everyone else was in bed, certainly," he acknowledged, with a return to a more professional detachment. "She's undoubtedly got a bit of a roving eye, even the little I've seen of her. But I don't see Wing Commander Swanton making an assignment right inside the Little Eva Operations Block."

Sergeant Hughes chuckled again.

"I don't think Swanton would know he was having an assignment," he explained. "And, to be fair to her, I wouldn't say Lady Osborne's eye's quite as roving as all that, either. I know it roved towards *you*, Bill," he said, to his inspector's intense embarrassment, "but I think that was merely being matey. You gave her rather a roving eye yourself, you know, when Titus introduced you. I was surprised at you."

Inspector Baker denied hastily. "I did nothing of the sort. I was just rather taken aback by her likeness to that picture on my bedroom wall."

"Well, she didn't realise she'd been spending the night with you," Sergeant Hughes explained. "She just thought you ogled her familiarly, so she ogled you back."

Inspector Baker caught up Merlin's copy of the Queen's Regulations, but it was too cumbersome to throw. He rejected it in favour of the Air Force List, and Sergeant Hughes ducked just in time.

"Anyway, if she wasn't roving towards Swanton, and she wasn't doing anything questionable with the blueprints," asked the inspector, "what is it you're suggesting she *was* doing, in that place at that hour?"

By way of explanation, Sergeant Hughes handed him the notes he had made of what the conscientious Dougal had reported.

"It seems, earlier on, Swanton had been raising some unchivalrous innuendoes that she might have been misbehaving with Squadron Leader Merlin."

"Not in the Operations Block, surely?" Inspector Baker scanned the report. "And, in any event, that was only said in joke. Macleod seems quite positive about that."

"Yes. So was Philip Cartwright, when I questioned him about it. Both healthy, clean-minded boys," Sergeant Hughes praised them approvingly. "I like to see it. But I wonder if Squadron Leader Merlin was so positive it was a joke, at the

~~time~~ **It was said. Have you noticed those two together—
Merlin and Lady Osborne?"**

Inspector Baker raised an awkward smile.

"Possibly Merlin's got a picture of her in his bedroom too," he suggested. "But I see what you mean. You think Swanton's joke may have been coming a bit near the knuckle, and the guilty pair didn't take kindly to it? Still, I hardly think they'd feel as bad as wanting to shoot him for it, Shonni. You're as lurid as Macleod. I can't see either Osborne by himself, or Merlin and Lady Laetitia in conspiracy, paddling out through all that rain to avenge the insult in blood in that melodramatic fashion."

"I don't suggest," said Sergeant Hughes slowly, "that Merlin and Lady Laetitia would necessarily start the business in conspiracy. In fact, I don't think that Merlin himself would have done anything like that at all, if he'd been the one to tackle him over that innuendo. But then, I don't imagine Merlin'd be feeling much like tackling Swanton over anything, not that particular night. He'd just had the show-down about the Q Cam, and in consequence Swanton wasn't speaking to him without being very nearly downright abusive. I doubt if Merlin'd risk going cap in hand to anyone in that frame of mind to ask him, 'Look here, chum, you're treading on some very delicate ground when you make jokes about me and Lady Laetitia, so would you kindly mind laying off it?' And yet someone had to go cap in hand to ask him," reflected Sergeant Hughes, thoughtfully. "Because if Swanton went on making jokes like that, he might make them in front of Sir Noel again—and Sir Noel, we're told, is besotted about Lady Laetitia. It wouldn't have done to let Swanton go putting any wrong ideas into his head, particularly if they weren't wrong ideas at all, but right ones."

Inspector Baker began to look very unhappy.

"So your idea is, Merlin deputed the job to the lady?"

"Yes. Either that, or she deputed it to herself. Merlin may

simply have mentioned the episode to her after the television, when they were out making a pot of tea together, and she may have decided for herself to speak to Swanton about it."

"But why choose the Operations Block for it?"

The sergeant shrugged.

"As Merlin told you himself, it's more private and less liable to interruption. And you've got to remember that what Swanton and Merlin and Good King Wenceslas call the Operations Block and look on as the holy of holies isn't an Operations Block at all in Lady Laetitia's mind. It's just the familiar old Folly, where I bet you she's had more midnight assignations in her time than either you or I or anyone else could count. A woman who lines up a top V.I.P. politician to sign passes for her every time she feels like spending a wedding anniversary on a secret island isn't likely to have quite the same respect for an Operations Block that the rest of us have. And I think that's how the murder might very well have come about.

"You see, Swanton wasn't the only one going round with a set of keys to that building, remember. There's another set as well—and that was in the possession of Sir Noel Osborne. I don't know what he does with his keys when he goes to bed at night, but he doesn't hand them in to the duty officer, because Merlin had to send up to Sir Noel's bedroom for them next morning. So, whether he leaves them in his trouser pocket, or sleeps with them under his pillow, or whatever he does, it's quite feasible his wife might get at them. Then, once she'd got them, she might tell him she was off to have a bath, or set her hair in lotion, or any of those things women do that you get resigned to them taking hours over. Then she'd slip off to the Folly to tackle Swanton, hoping Sir Noel'd be asleep before she got back and not miss her.

"But suppose you were Swanton, dutifully locking up secret documents in that safe, and you suddenly found this unauthorised civilian calmly letting herself into these top-secret

premises for a few private words with you. What'd you do, do you think? Do what you did over the domestic-site permit, laugh your head off and make a dirty joke or two? Or would you unexpectedly turn into an awkward, responsible Commanding Officer and point out exactly the breach of security involved, and exactly what it'd cost her, and her lover who might be concerned in sending her over, and her husband who'd left the second set of keys where she could get at them? Which do you suppose?"

Inspector Baker was silent.

"That's how I think Swanton may have talked himself into facing the business end of that Smith and Wesson," said Sergeant Hughes, "because it's the only way that can account for everyone's odd behaviour since. After that attempt to raise the alarm to Turvey, Lady Laetitia would realise that something must be done about those telephone lines, but she wouldn't know how to do it herself, of course. So I think she'd come hot-foot back to the house to rake up someone who did know. Not her husband, because he'd start asking difficult questions as to why she'd gone over in the first place. I think she'd rake up Squadron Leader Accessory-After-The-Fact William John Merlin to do the cable-cutting and general polishing up. She'd probably tell him how it happened, and that'd explain why we find Merlin so anxious now to see his pal buried with full military honours. He knows Swanton didn't lose his life making himself objectionable to an Operations officer—he knows he gave it on duty."

His almost invariably good-tempered face darkened into as much gloom as the inspector's.

"If I'm right, I'm sorry for poor Osborne. It'd be pretty nasty for him next morning, tumbling to the significance of whatever wet clothes the lady left behind her. And whatever wrong she and Merlin have been doing him, he stepped very gallantly into the breach when Merlin gave him the perfect let-out for not being on our query-list at all. He didn't need

to admit he knew all about those cables. But I think he's trying to see to it that the Osborne family shoulders its fair share of the blame one way or the other, and you can't but admire him for that.

"I'm sorry for Merlin, too. Without knowing this Naval exercise was keeping a record of all the shipping that night, it'd have been easy to try and present the whole thing as a mystery, not narrowed down to the island personnel at all. He didn't have to disconnect the P.B.X. line that particular way. He'd have Osborne's second set of keys to the building with him while he was cleaning up, and he could have made the disconnection in the switch-room, on the master rack, like an outside espionage agent would have done.

"But Merlin, as you've noticed, has a conscience; and he's worried about what those false alarms about espionage might do to the Project. So he's building up his case against an Operations officer very self-sacrificingly. That's why that leaf was torn out of the Operations Block Diary; not to prevent us finding out there was another name there in company with Swanton's—but to prevent us finding out that there wasn't. Poor devil—he must know which Operations officer the pointer's going to stop at if it stops at all, once we rule out espionage and start catching up on things like fingerprints on floor-polishers. And he must know what sort of a packet he'll cop if a jury decides he asked her to tackle Swanton beforehand. It's a small wonder he gets sick with fright every time a C.I.D. inspector looks at him, and I reckon we'll have to bury him with full military honours as well."

His mouth tightened.

"But as for the woman," he concluded softly, "I'm not in the same boat as you, Bill. There's no portrait of her hanging on *my* bedroom wall, and I don't feel in the least little bit sorry for *her*. So if that's what she's done, and she's sitting back now watching Merlin get on with it, I'll personally see she hangs at least one foot higher than he does."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SIR NOEL OSBORNE SEEMED RELIEVED RATHER THAN ANYTHING else by his summons to the detectives' temporary lair.

"I'm so glad I've been sent for at last," he confided, with his self-conscious, downcast grin. "Everybody else seems to have been making statements, and I was getting quite alarmed at being so conspicuously ignored. I was beginning to be afraid that, when you did get around to me, you might have worked up to that awful warning about 'You are not obliged to say anything, and everything you do say will be used in evidence against you'."

His tone was frivolous, but his attitude was intensely uncomfortable, and Sergeant Hughes gave his superior a heavy, significant glance. But Inspector Baker thought he recognised a more familiar ring in Noel Osborne's painstaking bravado than the rare uneasiness of a man trying to bluff his way out of a murder.

Scientific genius, the inspector recognised with a not unsympathetic respect, could carry a man a long way from very lowly beginnings, and Inspector Baker had the feeling the Earl of Yewmouth's son-in-law did not share his wife's comfortable assurance of their status in relation to policemen.

To the sloe-eyed Laetitia, the C.I.D. man thought, with an unaccustomed flare of class-resentment, police officers were people put into crowded market towns to find parking places for earls, and occasionally sent round villages on bicycles to sell tickets for charity concerts. If they appeared with a war-

rant in their hands, it was merely to seek the signature of a Justice of the Peace, so that they could go away and arrest someone else.

To her furtive-mannered husband, though, things might be different. It was possible that Noel Osborne's first acquaintance with police officers had been when they appeared disastrously on the doorstep of some near friend or neighbour, bearing a writ for common assault or a county court order robbing a home of all its inessential furniture. Noel's brand of anti-policeman nerves struck the inspector as quite different from the guilt-consciousness of William Merlin.

"What comes first? Name and address and what-have-you?" Noel asked Sergeant Hughes. He switched another ferret's grin on him, and dictated "Name: Noel Versailles Osborne. Shall I give you date of birth as well, or would you like to try and deduce that for yourselves?"

"December 25th, 1919," guessed Inspector Baker, with an answering grin, and Noel nodded resignedly.

"Horrible, isn't it? Still, it might be worse. I might've been born twenty-four hours later," he reflected philosophically, "and then I'd have had to be called Wenceslas Versailles Osborne, and that'd be terribly confusing for everybody now. I'd like you to write it down," he requested. Sergeant Hughes, who had made no move to take up pen or pencil, "because I do want to make a statement, seriously. There's something I feel I ought to get down in writing, on record, as much in my own interest as in yours."

Inspector Baker caught the leap of uncontrollable excitement in Noel's alert red-brown eyes as he said this, and knew in advance that the statement was going to be a crooked one. He had seen exactly that spark of terrified, ecstatic anticipation in the eyes of his nine-year-old son last year, when he had come upon him at a Guy Fawkes party, experimentally gripping at arm's length an effervescing Roman Candle.

How much easier life would be now, he thought wistfully,

if he could swing round on the ferret-faced Little Eva inventor, fetch him a resounding box on the ear and hurl out of harm's way whatever dangerous display of explosives Sir Noel was about to toy with.

"I've been accused by several people today," Noel announced, "of deliberately putting myself forward as a candidate for your investigation, just for the love of sensationalism. That's not a very nice thing to have said about one, and it's not a very safe thing, either, because deliberately misleading a policeman's a criminal offence, isn't it? So I *would* like you to make a note now, in writing, that I'm not doing anything like that. I didn't commit this murder, and I don't want you to think I did. I'd like to get that quite clear. All I've done is correct Squadron Leader Merlin's entirely erroneous impression that I didn't know enough about the telephone lines to make that disconnection."

He looked at Inspector Baker with a trace of anxiety.

"To keep quiet about that when I knew he'd excluded me on false grounds wouldn't have been right, surely? Even though I knew there'd be no harm done by it, seeing I didn't do it."

"No. It *was* quite correct to come forward with that." Inspector Baker considered him gravely. "What about your refusal to co-operate with Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates's security measures yesterday, though, Sir Noel? I'm not suggesting you weren't within your rights to deny him access to search your room, but wasn't that a little high-handed and unnecessary? As a senior executive in this Project, you must have realised the example it'd set to all these junior officers and the airmen."

To his surprise, the Project's senior executive suddenly gained a great spurt of confidence. Noel looked very sure of himself, and very pleased with himself too, as he answered emphatically, "I realised that all right, brother. That's why I did it."

"I'm sorry. I don't follow that."

"I don't altogether expect," said Noel with a return to his earlier hostility, "that you'll approve of it even when you do follow it. But I'll try to explain. I'm very sorry for poor Titus Oates, of course. It must have been appalling for him, stumbling on his brother-in-law like that, with the body in the dreadful state it was. And one can't really blame him for preferring to believe that ghastly piece of slaughter was the work of impersonal foreign spies, rather than that Swanton had been making himself so personally objectionable that someone couldn't stand him any longer, and put a bullet through him. Still, spy-mania's extraordinarily damaging, you know, and one must keep one's head over these things and maintain a proper sense of proportion."

"I was prepared to co-operate in all reasonable precautions to detect and put a stop to any espionage. In fact, I myself helped Titus and Merlin check all the secret equipment and documents, to make sure nothing was missing or looked as if it'd been tampered with. But nothing did. Everything was in its proper place. And I was certainly not prepared to co-operate in the promotion of what I'm sorry I must describe as a state of complete spy-hysteria throughout the island."

The physicist's tone was a very responsible one.

"Quite early in the morning," he told the detectives, "before the normal Whitehall departments could've been at work for more than an hour, I was considerably shocked by a telephone call I got from Air Commodore Routledge. We're on the verge of putting up a whole chain of these Little Evas round the coast of Britain, as you may know, and next Monday we hold our first conference with one or two high muckamucks from the leading electrical firms in industry to see what can be done about mass manufacture of some of the parts. Routledge has been doing the convening of this conference, and, as virtually our whole construction plans for the next two years depends on it, you can see it's quite an important meeting."

Yet here was Routledge, independently informing me he'd taken it on himself to hold up finalising the invitations to the industrialists, pending the clearing-up of this trouble here on St. Swithin's.

"That'll show you how disastrous it would've been not to get this espionage-panic back into its proper perspective. I got on the telephone to Sir Wenceslas, so that he could start work on calming things down a bit at the Air Ministry end, and I was just wondering how to set about calming St. Swithin's, when providentially Titus popped up with this ridiculous house-to-house search proposal. That struck me as the ideal chance to demonstrate to everyone that we were dealing with a simple, unalarming case of individual murder, not a grave national emergency that justified everyone throwing their civil rights overboard."

His glare defied the detectives to argue with him. Inspector Baker guessed that he probably attributed to the Scotland Yard Special Branch a certain lack of enthusiasm over civil rights, even when there wasn't a grave national emergency.

"It worked, too," declared Noel complacently. "I'm not sure it altogether worked with Titus. He lives in a happy little fantasia about spies creeping in and out of everywhere, even people aren't getting murdered in the Ops Block at dead of night, and I don't think anything'll ever really convince him now that the N.K.V.D. won't be found at the bottom of this particular business. But on Merlin and all the junior myrmidons, it acted like a bucket of cold water. The atmosphere was much saner after that."

He smiled less challengingly.

"And you didn't really lose anything by it, Inspector. That search was an absolute farce, you know. I've incontrovertible proof, if you want it, that Titus and his posse of over-excited S.P. corporals were quite incapable of making an effective search of a place like this."

This was no more than Inspector Baker had already decided for himself, but he did not propose to let the security-hostile physicist know that.

"Really, Sir Noel?" he asked, non-committally. "What proof might that be?"

The ferret's grin widened.

"Well, don't put this bit down in writing, because I shouldn't like to get anyone into trouble. But you know the sort of thing Titus was looking for, in his room-to-room check?"

"Squadron Leader Merlin showed me some blue-prints, if that's the technical term for them, of what he called the wiring charts for your Little Eva predictor. He told me he thought that they'd be the obvious best target for any espionage. In the wrong hands, given someone with the mathematical knowledge to interpret them, he claims they'd betray the whole set of formulae on which the system's based."

Noel nodded.

"Yes. But did you actually see these charts? Then, as you saw, they're far too complicated for anyone to attempt to copy out by hand. And there were none of the originals themselves missing—that was the first thing we checked. So, if there *had* been espionage, it'd have to have been by photography, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I gathered that."

"Unfortunately, they'd be rather easy meat for a photographer," Noel told him. "They're in black, charted on white, so they wouldn't present much difficulty. So what Titus and his party were looking for was either a camera that'd been smuggled into the island specifically to take these photographs, or else for something even smaller than a camera—just a roll of photographic film. We've got two cameras in the Operations Block, as I expect you've seen, which are used for recording various effects on the Little Eva gear. The film rolls for those

are extra fast, and especially manufactured for the Project, and they're all serially numbered, so that each roll can be accounted for. We checked them when we were checking everything else, and they hadn't been interfered with. But the cameras themselves are basically only an adaptation of a rather expensive but quite popular commercial one. They'd still be able to use the ordinary, commercial brand of film which can be bought in any good-class chemist's shop, and be quite good enough to photograph those charts.

"That, I must admit, was a possibility that had *me* a bit worried too. The cameras didn't appear to have been interfered with, when we examined them. I'd been using them the previous evening, just before I came back to the Mess for dinner, and they were both as I'd left them, hanging up in their proper place in the Operations Office. But unfortunately, I'd finished the old roll of film in both of them, and I'd refitted them with new rolls before I left the Block. So we couldn't safely rule out the chance that a Little Eva controller, for example, if he'd been bent on espionage, might have taken one of them up to the dark-room, unloaded it and reloaded it with a commercial film, taken what he wanted and then come back to the dark-room and put the numbered Little Eva roll back again. If he was skilful enough, there'd be no way of detecting that. But if that'd been done," ended Noel sensibly, "Titus obviously wasn't going to catch the villain by any bustling madhouse of a room-to-room search. The best way of dealing with that was the way you're doing it now—search everyone leaving the island from head to foot, so that if there *is* an unauthorised film in existence, the island's as far as it'll get. Because, do you know what size these Little Eva camera films are?"

"Three inches by one inch square, aren't they? Yes," Inspector Baker admitted. "There must be thousands of crannies to hide out a thing like that."

"A thing like that?" Noel laughed. "Shall I tell you what

the airmen *are* hiding out? Don't tell Good King Wenceslas or Titus, or even Merlin, if I let you in on this," he requested again, anxiously, "because it's something rather reprehensible, and drastic action'd probably follow if any of the lords and masters got to hear about it. But you know those metal notices commissionaires put up outside cinemas, to show people where to form the various queues?"

He held up a hand to a height of between three and four feet, described a circle about eighteen inches in diameter at the top of an imaginary pole and said, "Queue—3s. 9d.—here. That sort of thing."

"Yes."

"Well, they're going to one of those in the airmen's ablutions, in the old servants' quarters on the second floor," Noel told him. "Accommodation's strictly limited on that floor—normally the poor erks are expected to trail downstairs to the floor below, or even out into the cold, cold snow to the Bath-hut Nissen. And the only water-closet on the second floor hasn't got any bolt to the door."

He shrugged.

"Petty larceny, I'm afraid; and it must be awkward for the Yewmouth Regal nowadays when the three-and-ninepenny seats fill up. But, apart from Friday mornings, which is the O.C.'s weekly inspection parade, you'll normally find that three-foot-six metal notice nestling coily inside the door of that airmen's water-closet." He grinned again. "Except when no seat is available. Then they stand it outside the door instead. I don't know whether Wiz Merlin and the commissioned myrmidons know of its existence unofficially. Certainly, they've no official knowledge, or even a benevolent despot like Wiz would be bound to take some retaliatory measures. As for Titus Oates, you can be quite certain there'd be all hell to pay if ever he caught a glimpse of it."

"Well, Titus is the man who was going through the island with a small-tooth comb yesterday looking for a film three

inches long by one inch square. He didn't succeed in bringing that queue-sign to light; and if I judge the ingenuity of the St. Swithin's airmen, there isn't the slightest danger he ever could—or even that Chief Inspector Baker of Scotland Yard ever could, either. That's how seriously I take room-to-room searches on an establishment like this one, Inspector."

Inspector Baker nodded philosophically.

"Yes, I'm afraid you're quite right over that. It'd take a much larger force than one inspector and one sergeant to comb this island thoroughly, if there were any genuine opposition from the troops."

He sent a swift, momentary glance towards Sergeant Hughes.

"But, of course, the troops needn't concern us, from what I can see. There's no question of any of the airmen being able to gain access to the Block, is there? Wing Commander Swanton himself was in possession of the main set of keys to it, and, although he'd admit an Operations officer, he obviously wouldn't admit any of the domestic staff. And you yourself, Sir Noel, had possession of the only other keys, didn't you?"

His tone was very casual.

"What do you do with them at night, when you're asleep? I take it you're able to guarantee they couldn't have got out of your possession?"

Even if Sergeant Hughes's theory happened to be the right one, thought the inspector, he wasn't optimistic enough to expect a direct negative to this question. But it would be interesting to watch the physicist's reaction.

The physicist's reaction was, indeed, extremely interesting.

Noel's pale face suddenly flared into colour, and he mumbled, "Oh dear—here goes. This is another thing I've been wanting to make statements about, Inspector. You're going to think it indefensible, I know. But I'm afraid, for the first time in my life, I can't actually guarantee the whereabouts

of that set of keys that night. I'm very sorry, and I know I've no excuse for it."

Inspector Baker sat up.

"Oh? How does this come about? And why didn't we hear about this yesterday?"

"I didn't see you yesterday," said Noel reasonably. "And—this isn't very creditable, but perhaps you'll try and understand it—I couldn't quite bring myself to confess it to Titus. I was afraid he'd be self-righteous about it, and I might say something I'd regret afterwards, when he's grieving for a member of his own family. I've a rather quick tongue. I'm afraid. And it's the first time such a thing's ever happened to me. I'm not usually slipshod over these security requirements. Normally, when I've got these keys overnight, I hang my jacket right inside the curtain-rail of the bed—it's a four-poster, you know. So the jacket doesn't go out of my sight at all, and the keys are always in the jacket pocket, as a rule. But that night, it was all most unlucky."

Inspector Baker could almost hear Sergeant Hughes holding his breath.

"I'd had a long day's work," explained Noel pathetically, "and the minute I set foot in the house at the end of it, I was set upon by Swanton and Titus, very unpleasant about Laetitia being here and demanding to see her permit of entry. I was keeping that in the same pocket I keep my keys, and I couldn't find it at first, among various other papers. So I put the keys into my raincoat pocket, out of the way, while I looked. Then—this is quite inexcusable, and I don't excuse it—I took the raincoat off to hang it in the hall to dry off a little, and forgot all about the keys until Titus woke me at half past four next morning to say there was trouble with the telephone lines, and no one could get into the Ops Block to test them."

He was extremely embarrassed.

"Well, trouble with the telephone lines didn't sound anything

very ominous, and I didn't like to tell him I'd left the keys in my raincoat pocket, hanging in that hall all night. So I just said I'd get up and come over to the Block to help trace the fault, and bring the keys down with me when I came. I picked up the raincoat in the hall as I went through, without saying anything. It's a very shameful episode, I know, and I can only plead that they did rather fly at my throat over Laetitia, and I'm afraid I got flustered. Victor Swanton said something extremely offensive, which upset me for a minute, although," he added, with a very forced laugh, "not to such an extent that I felt like murdering him."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, he only meant it in a joke," Noel told him, "and I didn't really pay it all that much attention." From his whole attitude, it was clear that he had paid it a very great deal of attention. There was outrage in every syllable, as he went on to repeat, not the insult Sergeant Hughes expected, but an entirely different one.

"He merely suggested that my programme of modifications was as much a put-up job as Yewmouth's yarns about wanting the books dusting, and it was a pity I hadn't had the consideration to get married on Christmas Day, when the station would be off the air anyway and it wouldn't mean disrupting the nation's defence training every time I celebrated the anniversary."

Inspector Baker lowered his head very swiftly, to hide a double smile both at the sally itself and at the undisguised expression of defraudment with which Sergeant Hughes greeted it.

"That was a most objectionable thing to say," he sympathised smoothly. "But not, I agree, grounds for murder."

"It was an abysmally ignorant thing to say," said Noel loftily, "and showed a lamentable lack of technical grasp of what these modifications aim to achieve."

"I don't believe a bloody word," breathed Sergeant Hughes, softly but most indignantly in his inspector's ear. "You mark my words, he knows what we're after. He had those keys where he always has them—hanging behind that four-poster canopy, where his wife can get at them unbeknownst while he's cleaning his teeth."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHEN THE THREE R.A.F. OFFICERS CAME BACK FROM RAMSWELL at the end of the afternoon, there was no sign of the sickness which had racked Merlin on the outward journey. He was as full of spirit and energy as a big cork which has managed to win its way to the surface after a long, straining period under unwelcome pressure.

The weather had worsened again. It was raining, and there was a high wind, and Merlin's two fellow-passengers, Sir Wenceslas and Titus, passed the journey sensibly in the cover of the boat's very small cabin. But Merlin, after prowling up and down the deck restlessly for a few minutes, then took over the little vessel's steering; and the two older officers heard him chanting away very cheerfully to himself as he sped it over the fifteen-mile voyage and then brought it very cleanly and expertly to the island's mine-bordered landing-stage.

Even when it was raining, the comings and goings of an Air Marshal merited a reception committee, and Titus observed with approval the presence at the landing-stage of Merlin's deputy, Bob Ames, accompanied by the duty officer, Dougal Macleod. It was with considerably less approval that he saw also the decorative attendance of Laetitia Osborne, her dark beauty framed in an expensive scarlet raincape and hood.

Ames and Macleod sketched the Air Marshal an awkward, civilian salute. Merlin smiled down on these two delinquents in the friendliest of humours and inquired paternally as to the results of their day's enforced labours.

"Oh, fine," replied Bob, whose uncertainties of temper did

not include the bearing of malice. "You can remuster me as a junior technician any time you like now."

"And can I hire Dougal out by the hour; at a huge profit, as a beach photographer in Yewmouth?"

The young technical officer, who had endured an even worse day than he had feared at the hands of the irascible Bob and was less ready than the controller to be teased over his professional shortcomings, said stiffly, "I think I've a fair understanding of dark-room procedure now, sir."

"Jolly good. Well, tomorrow," the sub-commander promised disconcertingly, "we'll have a trade test session, and see how far these boasts are justified." •

Dougal's expression turned stiffer still, and Bob looked a little unenthusiastic too. Merlin's standards of efficiency, they both knew, were likely to be a good deal more stringent than those the impatient Bob had been able to impose on Dougal. All Bob said aloud, though, was a compliant, "Roger-dodge, sir, if you don't mind making it in the afternoon. I've been hit by a most shocking toothache all day"—this was offered as much in oblique apology to Dougal as in explanation to Merlin—"and I've fixed up a dental appointment at Bishop Brad for the morning. I thought I'd fix a trip in with the ration run."

"Any time you like," agreed Merlin equably. Bob sent another conciliatory smile towards Dougal, and then turned his attention nervously to making a good impression on the Air Marshal as they walked to the Mess.

Merlin, at a sign from Laetitia, slowed his long stride so that the rest of the party could draw beyond earshot. She fell back with him and, when she thought it safe, said softly, "Darling Wiz, I've been with you every minute. I don't have to ask if it's all right. I can see it is."

He nodded wordlessly, and turned a smile of the deepest radiance on her. She looked swiftly ahead past Sir Wenceslas and his satellites, across the lawn and to the house beyond.

Then she halted, stood on tiptoe and, reaching for Merlin's weather-ruffled damp hair, pulled his head down almost inside her scarlet rainhood, in a tense embrace.

Merlin responded with a practised, automatic zest, until he recalled the openness of their situation.

"No, stop it, Tisha. Let go. One of the airmen might see you. Or what if old Wenceslas looks round?"

He broke away, a little breathlessly, and was just in time to see a silhouette disappear at the ante-room window.

"Noel!" he identified it in consternation. "Oh Tisha, that was Noel, looking right at us. He must have seen that. Here," he demanded in great anxiety, "have you told him anything?"

"My dear Sir Lancelot!" Laetitia's sloe eyes were tantalising. "You surely don't think I tell Noel things like that? He's a dreadful old rigid Methodist. He'd be most unsympathetic."

"He'll be unsympathetic now all right!" exclaimed Merlin, dismayed. "Oh hell—you shouldn't have done that."

She chuckled, and he glanced down at her sharply. "You devil—I believe you did it on purpose! Did you know he was there, all the time?"

She made no direct answer to this.

"Well, you shouldn't have done it either. You were doing it just as much as I was," she reproved him self-righteously.

"You know jolly well you made me. What on earth am I to do now?" He was silent, and then said reproachfully, "What a dirty trick! You know, Tisha, you've been an absolute angel to me, but you aren't being very kind to Noel, are you?"

Laetitia's face hardened.

"Noel isn't being very kind to me," she countered.

A look of awkward embarrassment flooded Merlin's square, good-natured face, and she giggled unexpectedly. "He keeps deserting me for a frump of a female called Eva," she explained. "He deserves everything he gets."

Merlin jumped.

"Laetitia, you oughtn't to know anything about that particular female," he told her, scandalised, "even her name. And if you do know, you certainly mustn't mention it in public conversation like that. You'll get Noel juggled."

"A good thing too," Laetitia retorted, rebelliously. "Squadron Leader Merlin, don't be so silly and tiresome. You sound just like Titus Oates. Who do you think's in public out here? Do you keep a couple of screaming Foreign Office fairies at the bottom of your garden, that are likely to flit off and tell everything to Soviet Russia?"

Merlin grinned a little, but would not abandon his stand.

"It's on principle, you mustn't. Otherwise, you begin by nattering on the lawn. Then it moves into the ante-room, where the stewards can join in when they bring the tea, and the next step's a top-secret conference over a quiet pint in the Speculation at Yewmouth. And so on like that. We've got to draw the line somewhere, quite early on, so we draw it round the walls of the Operations Block."

He looked at her, saw that she was not enjoying her lecture, and softened it by adding, "Besides which, don't forget, madam, you are speaking of the woman I love. It's not just Noel. Everyone loves that particular frump of a female."

"I don't. She bores me stiff. In fact, nothing'd give me greater pleasure than to see her fire off one of her silly little pop-guns straight up in the air and then smack down again, and blow herself sky-high. Except I'd hate anything permanent to happen to the Folly," she reflected. "Especially now Noel's got the clock chiming."

"This is almost blasphemy!"

"Yes, isn't it? Oh well—never mind. Let's talk about you, instead." She linked her arm affectionately in his and rested her head against his shoulder. "Well, Squadron Leader Worry-Guts, so you see you were perfectly all right. Wouldn't you

have saved yourself an awful lot of grief if you'd listened to me in the first place? If you can't trust the woman you're supposed to be in love with, after all, who *can* you trust. Aren't you thoroughly well ashamed of yourself?"

"Yes," said Merlin, taking the exchange reprimand meekly.

"So I should hope. Do you panic around like this all the time you're firing off the pop-guns too? You must be an unbearable man to have to work under. Still, I'm glad the crisis is safely over for you," she added, relenting. "Poor old William John, are you going to be happy now?"

He nodded again, and then looked conscience-stricken.

"That sounds dreadful. And I'm glad to say," he amended seriously, "I don't think it's true now. I can't really be happy it turned out this way. Vic never meant me any real harm, you know, Laetitia," he explained himself with difficulty. "It was just that he was a sort of Napoleon. All he could see was his own Swanton-star, and he just naturally took it that the best thing for everyone was simply to hitch on to that. That anyone might have different ambitions of their own was out of his focus. But whatever he did, he still reckoned on me as one of his friends. He'd be horribly surprised now at the idea of me going around being happy he's got his brains blown out."

The memory of the horrible sight in the Operations Room shocked him into another silence.

"And I'm not happy," he went on resolutely. "I had a terrible feeling at first that I was going to be. But I'm getting over that now. Already, once or twice today while I've been touting Good King Wenceslas round Rams-well, I've found myself missing Victor quite horribly. Little things Wenceslas was being a bit dim about, that I'd have liked a laugh over behind his back, and there was nobody there to laugh with. You know, with all due respect to Bob Ames and the Rams-well mob, the rest of the Project types are just milk-and-water compared with Victor. I'm going to be be desperately lorn and

lost without him in spite of everything, and that's a very good thing," he ended, a slight tremor in his voice. "You can't think what a dreadful feeling it was, not caring, earlier on."

"Poor Wiz!" Laetitia snuggled more closely to him, but he fended her off, half in fun and half in earnest.

"Don't 'Poor Wiz' me, when you're doing your level best to get me into still deeper waters. You shove off and think up some pacifying line for your Bolshie Boffin, so I don't have him duelling with me while Good King Wenceslas is still around."

Her dark eyes widened.

"You're not panicking about Good King Wenceslas, on top of everything else surely? Oh Wiz, you old backslider! I thought you were the one who didn't care twopence about all this non-technical promotion."

Merlin's smile this time was sheepish.

"Yes, I know. I *am* a backslider," he acknowledged. "Before this happened, I always reckoned I was doing the R.A.F. a most tremendous favour, wasting my highly-trained mind filling in weekly strength returns, and sitting looking solemn in the admin. office having the airmen charged, instead of the Ops Block transmitters. But now I know there's a fair chance of getting all that taken off me. I realise I don't want to lose it at all. Imagine one of those oafs from Ramswell ruling the roost inside the Folly, making changes in all my operational techniques and perhaps not even letting me touch the controlling side at all, because he reckons a technical officer's place is in the Ohm." .

He winced at the thought.

"And even on the domestic site," he admitted, "I've decided it's more convenient to be Sultan of St. Swithin's oneself. I shouldn't like to have to go flannelling Squadron Leader Somebody-Else every time I wanted to run a liberty boat to Yewmouth. Your second-cousin Acton was quite right, I'm afraid, Tisha. All power tends to corrupt, and it's too late

for me now. I'm corrupted. I'll never be the honest working man I was before they heaped these honours on me."

Again, he was half in fun and half in earnest.

"So, if you notice me starting in to have all the coal-heaps whitewashed," he warned her wryly, "and setting off unexpected fire-drills to show Wenceslas what a praiseworthy eager beaver I am, don't tell me I'm an abject crawler. I shan't need telling—I'll know. I'll be doing it on purpose."

She laughed. His corruption did not appear to be worrying him very much, for he laughed too, and was again singing cheerfully to himself when, leaving her at the house, he came into his administrative office to deposit the Ramswell mail.

He had momentarily forgotten the tenancy of Scotland Yard, and he stopped singing abruptly as he found the two C.I.D. men in occupation.

Inspector Baker looked up at him, considerably startled by this radical change of mood.

"Shonni, I've boobed," he accused himself in whispered vexation to his sergeant. "That's the last time I let Master Merlin off the lead, all by himself, on the mainland. What the devil do you suppose he's got hold of—or got rid of—at Ramswell to take such a weight off his mind?"

Merlin laid his papers on the desk and began a disconcerted apology.

"I'm so sorry. I'd quite forgotten you'd be here. I won't disturb you."

He bounded optimistically for the door, but Inspector Baker called him back.

"You're not disturbing us, Squadron Leader Merlin. We wanted to see you, anyway. We've picked up certain new information during the day, and there are one or two further questions I'd like to ask you, arising from it."

He saw Merlin turn rigid, and felt a little reassured. Whatever the sub-commander had got away with at Ramswell, he

comforted himself, there was evidently still enough damning information waiting to be found on St. Swithin's to cause Merlin a near-paralytic attack of fright at the mention of further questions.

"Shall I sit down?" Merlin invited himself, in the faint tones of someone who doubted how long he could stay on his feet. "What do you want to know?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PROBABLY ONLY ONE THING, THOUGHT INSPECTOR BAKER, would put Merlin into quite such a state of terror as that. He must be afraid that the "new information" had been contributed by an airman who had actually seen the murderer on the way to or from the Operations Block.

He hesitated over whether to try his hand at another frontal attack. Then, reflecting that he could not be sure yet whether it was Merlin himself, or Laetitia Osborne the sub-commander feared had been seen, he decided that bluff could wait.

"I'd like to know," he asked instead, "why you didn't think it necessary this morning to tell me about the recent trouble between Wing Commander Swanton and Flight Lieutenant Ames."

Merlin let out his breath in a little gasp.

"Have you found something against Bob Ames?" he asked, troubled. But the inspector noticed with a diminishing of sympathy that the hunted look in his dilated grey eyes had instantly given way to ignoble relief.

"I've something against *you* at the moment, Squadron Leader Merlin," the detective answered shortly. "I want to know why you withheld information so obviously pertinent to our inquiries, and I also want to know exactly what this trouble was about."

Merlin dropped his head.

"I think *you* ought to ask that off Ames himself."

"I'm asking you," said the inspector.

"I don't like discussing things which were told to me in confidence as the section head," complained poor Merlin, sounding so genuine that Inspector Baker condóled with him less bellicosely.

"That's unpleasant, I know. But you may be quite sure nothing you tell us'll go further than ourselves if it turns out not to be material. But it's been suggested it was Ames who was the target of the wing commander's threat at the dinner table. I should like your opinion on that."

If Merlin were, as Sergeant Hughes was trying to establish, an accessory after a murder by Laetitia Osborne, he was a ruthless one; for he now hung his head again, and mumbled, "Yes, I suppose he might have been," with a reluctance that carried immense conviction.

"Very well," persisted the inspector. "Now tell me what was the trouble between those two, please."

"Oh, all right. Bob's got himself engaged to be married to one of the girls at Bishop Bradbury—she's the Sector Commander's P.A., actually—and he's been trying to persuade Swanton to let him have an exchange posting with one of the Ramswell controllers, so that they can get married. We're not allowed to do that on St. Swithin's, as I think you know, because of the difficulties over security if they had to find us married quarters."

"And wouldn't the Project Commander sanction the exchange?"

"No. He turned it down flat."

"Why?"

"He thought it'd be a bad precedent to set. And I think he also took the view that Bob—Flight Lieutenant Ames ought to be able to know his own mind for more than twelve months at a stretch. It's only that time since the Service took over the Project, and Ames was posted in here, you see; and he signed a voluntary agreement then that he wasn't going to get married for three years. But of course," pointed out

Merlin, who was considerably more sentimental than the late Project Commander had been, "he hadn't met this girl then."

"No." Inspector Baker considered the sub-commander coldly. "But you didn't think that was worth mentioning to me this morning?"

Merlin coloured.

"Well, I did tell you, didn't I, that I knew of some reasons why each and every one of us might've been in trouble with the wing commander. That's only one of many. And it's all very easy to say 'Here's a nice fruity reason for Ames to chase out after Swanton to talk things over, and end up by shooting him', but there's nothing at all to show that's what really happened. There are several equally fruity reasons against other people too. Take myself, for instance—I was quite convinced Victor Swanton meant that crack for me. Suppose he'd wanted to turn awkward about that Q Cam business, for example? I mean, *I* thought it was a highly justified comic experiment, but I don't suppose that Good King Wenceslas would've been all that humorous about it, if Swanton had reported it to him and complained he didn't think I was fit to be left in charge of this out-station."

"That's a sporting alternative," Inspector Baker commended him more approvingly.

"Or Noel Osborne," Merlin enlarged hastily, not wanting to give the C.I.D. men time to consider the sporting alternative too unsportingly. "What about him? Victor's been anxious for a very long time to get Noel Osborne's wings clipped. He'd have screened him right out of the Project altogether, with all the other I.A.U. candidates, if he'd had his way. He was always ticking about Noel being an unsatisfactory security risk. What if Noel had got alarmed he'd make a lever out of this business with Laetitia's permit, to get him out of the Project for good?"

Inspector Baker opened his eyes a little. This was some-

thing the urbane Sir Wenceslas Jones had apparently decided to keep from the Scotland Yard Special Branch.

"You're not seriously telling me, are you," the inspector asked with professional interest far removed from mere homicide, "that you think Sir Noel Osborne an unsatisfactory security risk?"

The politically innocent Merlin, to whom all Scotland Yard detectives were exactly the same, felt none of Sir Wenceslas's promptings towards discretion. He broke into his ready laugh.

"I don't," he said, "but Victor Swanton did. There was a terrible row, you see, at a very high policy level, when it first came to deciding what to do with the Project, once it was obvious the idea was going to work. Victor, and a lot of V.I.P.s who thought the same way, wanted to turn it over to N.A.T.O. immediately, and have a chain of Little Evas right across Northern Europe. That's what would've been done, too, Victor told me, if it hadn't been for Noel Osborne. Noel didn't want to have any other power outside Britain getting hold of it. So he and his senior research team banded together, and more or less presented an ultimatum to the Air Defence Committee that, the day the Uncle Tom Project went outside this country, all the British technologists on the job'd ~~down~~ tools and have nothing more to do with it. Of course, the Defence Committee had no choice but to give in to that. They wouldn't want to give the scheme to N.A.T.O. lock, stock and barrel and trust to the benevolence of all the other countries to see Britain all right for her share of the Little Eva chain. So the result is, as I think you know, that we're just about to embark on an all-British Little Eva chain instead. So Victor, who was a tremendously N.A.T.O.-minded character, always regarded Noel as a very dangerous Red."

"And is he?" Inspector Baker made a hasty mental review of his brief Special Branch records of Noel Osborne's public and private activities, and could recall nothing more ominous than a few energetic but innocuous appearances at what the

recorder had classified as "crank" Ban-the-Atomic-Arms-Race rallies.

"Oh no," said Merlin, comfortably reassuring. "I think Noel's point of view was that the Uncle Tom system's based on such a widely-known method of electronic measurements—he stumbled on it himself while he was working on pure meteorological radar—that it's only a matter of a few years before everybody works round to it anyway. And so, Noel's afraid that if the N.A.T.O. countries got it first, and knew they'd only a five-year advantage over the countries of the Iron Curtain, they might be tempted to start up a war of devastation while the going was good. Naturally, Noel's not anxious to have any personal responsibility in sparking off a disaster like that."

"What's an I.A.U. Candidate?" asked the inspector, un-reassured.

Merlin became gently disapproving.

"Don't you know? It's one of those merciless little sets of initials the Service pins on to people without an atom of justification, carrying meanings that'd put any civil organisation straight into the High Courts for criminal libel. During the war, they had a quite dreadful set called L.M.F. they used to chalk against the names of aircrew who couldn't quite stand the pace. That stood for Lack of Moral Fibre, and anyone who got it was always sympathetically assured there was absolutely nothing derogatory about it. This new set, I.A.U., is another equally un-derogatory set Victor Swanton and Good King Wenceslas and perfectly nice people like that have dreamed up for the Uncle Tom Project. It means 'Interests and Associates Unreliable', and it's a euphemistic way of saying that while no one's actually calling you a traitor, you can't really be trusted not to betray your country's top secrets if you're made privy to them."

"And that's the assessment you tell me Sir Noel Osborne got?" Inspector Baker's eyes were now very wide indeed.

"Good Lord, no. I didn't mean to tell you anything like that. Noel's never been assessed as anything. He was there as the kingpin before any of these security-kings got their screens across the Project at all, so they just had to like him or lump him. And anyway, as I told you, the whole thing's frightfully libellous, and the assessments are terribly arbitrary, too. For instance, it's quite all right for Victor Swanton to join the English-Speaking Union, and when the Cartwright twins' father gets made chairman of his county Conservative Association, everybody's entirely happy. But I'm not sure there'd be the same complacency if he'd been elected chairman of his county Labour Party, and I'm quite certain if anyone breezed in and announced they'd just joined a Friends of Russia Society, Titus and the Air Ministry O.G.P.U. would go screaming up the wall. Yet when you look at it dispassionately, that's exactly the same thing as the English-Speaking Union, only Russia instead of America; and to a country that isn't supposed to be at war with either of them, that shouldn't make any difference."

"*Has* Sir Noel joined a Friends of Russia Society?" asked the inspector, faintly.

Merlin laughed again.

"No. I know we call him the Bolshie Boffin, but Bolshie in the Royal Air Force doesn't mean the same as it does in civilian life. It just means generally bloody-minded, which old Noel takes a great pride in being. But he's not Red; and the sort of upbringing he had, you can't blame him for turning out a bit bloody-minded, either."

"Why, what happened to him?"

"Well, he hadn't much of a time as a kid. His father deserted his mother when he was about four, and he was brought up in a depressing back street in East London. Unfortunately for him," Merlin said solemnly, "his mother *didn't* desert him. She's a most terrifying old lady; and she's still bringing Noel up very firmly in the way he should go. She

must be a beaver for work, because in addition to supporting herself and Noel when he was young, she still had enough energy left over to be a pillar of the local Methodist Church, and a councillor with the local Labour Party. She's an alderman now, on the L.C.C., and she's a lot more extreme than Noel. He's bowing to fate now, and settling down resignedly as a knight to a life of disgusting luxury among Earls and Air Marshals. But she pounds angrily on in the same back street, and refuses to accept any help off him, because she won't batten on the starving poor."

Merlin's voice was not without admiration.

"Noel's a little bit of a Labour alderman too, in spite of his Earl-in-law," he said. "Having been kept under by the wicked Tories in the bad old days and only able to get as far as a research fellowship at Cambridge on scholarships, he's naturally determined to fight for a far better chance for the back-alley kids of today. Fair shares for all, that's Noel's warcry. But that doesn't make him a traitor."

"No," agreed the Special Branch man mildly. "And apparently it doesn't get him screened out of the Project, either."

"That's only because you can't screen out the kingpin without screening out the Project at the same time," declared Merlin. "They'd have done it quick enough if they'd dared, if only," he added with a grin, "for the sake of screening Alderman Mrs. Osborne out of the Air Ministry cocktail-parties. Noel's a most loyal son, and he and Laetitia insist on taking her to everything; and she's even more Bolshie than he is, and embarrasses Good King Wenceslas hideously by asking things like 'How much are the *pâté* sandwiches costing the taxpayer?'"

"I take it from all this," Inspector Baker worked round to his question casually, "that you're a personal friend of the Osbornes as well as a colleague? You know them pretty well?"

"Yes. Well, not the father, of course. He's supposed to be dead and gone now. If he wasn't, Mrs. Osborne told me, he'd

have shown up when Noel's name was in the Honours' list two years ago and touched him for at least a fiver. But I shouldn't think he's dead really. He was a drunken merchant seaman, so I like to picture him as one of those W. W. Jacobs characters, beachcombing happily on an obscure South Sea Island with a dusky and bigamous wife and twenty khaki children; horribly frightened every time a liner from England puts in, for fear it contains a diligent Hornsey Methodist come to save his soul."

Sergeant Hughes could bear it no longer.

"What about Lady Laetitia, sir? How well do you know her?"

Merlin did not turn a hair.

"Pretty well, too," he answered unhesitatingly. "When I first came into the Project and Noel was running St. Swithin's, he had her and their two kids living down here, just outside Yewmouth. And I still see her around a fair amount at all the social palavers." He gave the sergeant his innocent, care-free smile and assured him. "You don't have to worry about *her* joining a Friends of Russia Society. She'd never do that. She comes from a very long line of crusted Tories."

Sergeant Hughes merely grunted. But Inspector Baker, as they made their way to their borrowed bedrooms to prepare for dinner, admitted defeat.

"You may be right, Shonni, but I must say, I doubt it. If he's really playing around with Osborne's wife behind his back, he carries it off very coolly. I never saw him bat an eyelid over her. I wish to goodness," he sighed, "we'd been able to hit on what it was he *was* batting an eyelid over."

Sergeant Hughes was on the verge of defeat too. But at that moment, as they walked along the corridor passing the Earl's bedroom, he caught a faint wrangle of voices from inside the room, and fancied he heard the name of his quarry "Wiz Merlin", in Noel's angry tones.

Unchivalrously, he halted outside the door.

"Let's see if Osborne's carrying it off so coolly," he proposed grimly.

His suspicions, if not his social conduct, were dramatically justified. For a few moments, he could hear nothing but the low murmur of two people conducting an argument in icy voices, too angry to dare to shout. Then Noel's composure failed him again, and the two detectives heard his voice rise incoherently into a very Cockney yell.

"You'll shut up and do as you're told," Inspector Baker was electrified to hear him order his wife, almost in a sob. "I'm not arguing with you."

Then came three staccato cracks of sharp, physical blows and a low protest of "Noel!" from Laetitia.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BOTH INSPECTOR BAKER AND SERGEANT HUGHES WERE AWARE of what was likely to happen to policemen who tried interfering in domestic brawls between husband and wife. Sergeant Hughes's only reaction was to look placidly pleased at this unexpected confirmation of his suspicions, and to continue towards his own room, satisfied.

Inspector Baker, to his own strong censure, found himself viewing the episode less professionally. He contented himself by commenting wooden-faced to Sergeant Hughes, "I should say that's the merchant navy drunk coming out, rather than the Hornsey Methodist, wouldn't you?" But he stared extremely heatedly at the oil-painting in his bedroom and when, a minute or two late for the meal, Noel arrived at the dinner table unaccompanied, the inspector's regard was not friendly.

"Laetitia won't be down for dinner," Noel announced, his own expression as black as a thunder-cloud. "She's got a headache."

Inspector Baker was glad to see that the physicist at least had the grace to look uncomfortable under the flood of concerned condolence which greeted this.

"We'll organize something for her on a tray," Merlin told him. "What would she like—the whole works, or just something like soup or Bovril?"

"No, it's all right, Wiz. She won't want anything. It's nothing to worry about. She quite often gets these turns."

"She seemed perfectly all right not an hour ago," fretted Merlin.

"Yes," agreed Noel sardonically. "It does come on rather suddenly. But don't bother about it. She'll sleep it off." He dropped his voice, and suddenly added softly, in a murmur of indescribable menace, "You just leave her alone, Merlin, and there'll be nothing to worry about."

Not since the first day he had been posted into the Project had Merlin ever heard Noel Osborne award him the formality of his surname. He stared at him. Noel stared stonily back, and Merlin, turning scarlet to the roots of his hair, dropped his eyes in confusion. Then he turned his attention with relief to a burst of noise from the other end of the table, where the Cartwright twins had just heard of Bob Ames's projected visit to the dentist next morning.

"Oh, Bob, that's frightfully inconsiderate," Pip was protesting. "That's jumping the gun. You can't just call dental appointments from the vasty deep like that, without consulting all the other interested parties first. That's the line Jo and I were going to shoot, to fix Jo's getaway."

Bob grinned sheepishly, and said, "Dougal will testify my toothache's not been just a line-shoot all day, won't you, Doug?"

Dougal, who was still on his damaged dignity, merely inclined his head.

"Well, I still think it sounds like a put-up job," insisted Pip, "and a frantically corny one, at that. If I were you, Inspector, I'd put a tail on him and see what he's really going for. I swear this is just an excuse to slope off to the mainland unsuspected, and do something nefarious."

"You can check with the Bishop Brad dental section," offered Bob. "They've got the appointment."

"Ah! But will you come when they do call for you?" Jo completed Pip's earlier quotation felicitously. "No, you tail him, Inspector. You won't lose by it, even if he's innocent. They've got a jolly good dentist's waiting-room at Bishop Bradbury—you'll be very comfortable."

Inspector Baker thanked him politely and asked, "And are you and your brother also looking for an excuse to slope off and do something nefarious, did you say?"

"Not me," Pip answered him promptly. "I'm the soul of rectitude. But Jo is."

Jo nodded.

"It's quite true. I'm a member of a secret society," he explained solemnly to the C.I.D. men, "and I've had orders from the cell-leader to try to get over to Yewmouth tomorrow. Following up a recent security outrage on the island, there's something I've got to smuggle across the water, in the teeth of Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates's strenuous opposition. Squadron Leader Merlin will confirm it," he offered. "He's a member of the secret society, too."

Merlin, suddenly realising what he was talking about, struggled not to laugh.

"Be quiet, Jo, you impertinent young pup," he ordered inelegantly, glancing a little apprehensively towards the Air Marshal to see how he was taking the levity, and then, a little maliciously, at Titus Oates.

What he saw of Titus sobered him immediately; for Titus, who had had an exhausting day with his bereaved wife and old father-in-law, was drooping very pathetically.

"Please, Bill," he requested with a tremor as he caught Merlin's eye, "I'd really rather they didn't make jokes about it. I know it's not deliberately heartless. They're young, and it's natural and probably best they should try to laugh it off. But *I* can't, I'm afraid." His reproachful eyes added, "And *you* shouldn't be able to, either," and so did Merlin's own troubled conscience.

"I'm sorry, Titus," he acknowledged, ashamed. "You're quite right," while Jo simultaneously mumbled, "I'm sorry, sir—I'm a stupid clot. I didn't think," and looked as if he wanted to crawl away under the table.

Titus managed a smile for both of them and said very

briskly, "Do you really wish to go to Yewmouth tomorrow, Jo? If there's some sensible reason, I can't see there need be any difficulty, need there, Inspector?"

Jo looked at Merlin, who explained, "Yes, there is a sensible reason. The meaning of all that tarradiddle was merely that Jo's our Mess secretary, Titus, and I did ask him, before all this happened, to go on an errand for the Mess. It is a secret, but not a nefarious one, of course. I'll write it down for you."

He scribbled on the back of an envelope: "Tomorrow is the Osbornes' wedding anniversary, and we want to get a present."

Titus read it and passed it to Inspector Baker, commenting wryly, "I'm sorry you think I'd be strenuously opposed to that, Jo. I'm resigned to being regarded as a cross between Methuselah and Mrs. Grundy—that's all part of my job—but it's a bit 'ard to have Scrooge thrown in as well."

Jo, deciding cautiously that this was a joke and not another embarrassing piece of naked suffering, felt a little better.

Inspector Baker glanced at the note, and then glanced at the writer, a study in perplexity. Merlin was sitting calmly at the head of the table, betraying not the slightest symptom of uneasy conscience over the wedding anniversary of a couple who had just come to blows over him. He appeared nothing if not a hospitable Mess president, delighting in honouring his distinguished guests; either that, thought the inspector, baffled. or a far more accomplished hypocrite than he had shown himself on the boat that morning.

"I'd forgotten all about that," Merlin told his fellow-officers guiltily. "We must have a Mess meeting before we turn in tonight."

Noel, the unconscious recipient of the Mess's bounty, looked up ungratefully.

"Must you, tonight, Wiz?" he asked. "I wanted you over in the Block. One minor result of this business," he made his best attempt at a tactful glance in the direction of Titus, "is

that I'm falling badly behind^o schedule with the mods. I've got on as best I could while you've been at Ramswell, with the help of the Laird here, when he wasn't developing imaginary photographs; but I need an experienced plumber's mate for some of it, or I won't be clear before the industrial conference on Monday. And I must be clear for that."

Merlin nodded.

"The Mess meeting won't take five minutes, If you like to go over and start up, I'll be with you before the set's warm, and stay as long as you like. I'll be glad to, Noel."

Inspector Baker, recalling Merlin's severe seasickness in the morning and the gruesome afternoon of inquest and funeral arrangements, thought the sub-commander might have been forgiven for deciding to spend the next few hours in the comfort of the Mess, rather than back at work at the scene of the murder. But Merlin seemed unalloyedly delighted at the idea of returning to the safe world of radio valves; or perhaps, thought Inspector Baker, watching them closely, unalloyedly delighted that Noel Osborne was still prepared to work with him.

Sergeant Hughes, his thoughts also on Noel's role as outraged husband, asked casually, sounding a little more Welsh than usual, "Only a routine precaution, this is: but if there's to be any more going into that Block late at nights, there's been no replacing that pistol we've taken away, I suppose?"

Merlin's enthusiasm wilted instantly. His big fists clenched into tight, white knuckles and he looked miserably at Noel.

"He's frightened I might be thinking of shooting you," he explained, with a most unconvincing laugh.

"Not necessarily, Don't be so self-centred, brother." Noel cocked a challenging eye at the sergeant. "He might equally well be frightened of me shooting you."

"That was chiefly what I had in mind, sir," agreed Sergeant Hughes, so placidly that Noel never dreamed he meant every word of it. The physicist grinned at him, more amiable than

he had been since the meal started, and said, "There you are, Wiz. So stop dramatising yourself."

"Would you like me to go over too?" volunteered Titus gallantly. Titus, unlike Merlin, was very much more inclined to the comfort of the ante-room than the austerity of the Operations Block, but he added, "I've my report to get out for the Air Ministry security section, and I can do it over there quite conveniently, if either of you—or the police—would feel easier for the presence of a third party."

This praiseworthy offer was received with unflattering dismay by both prospective gunmen. Noel said bluntly, "Certainly not. I'm trying to get down to some serious work." The gentler Merlin answered, "No, it's quite all right, thank you, Titus. You're tired out anyway. I should forget the Air Ministry security for one evening if I were you; and make an early night of it. As for me, I'm ready to take the risk on Noel if he doesn't mind taking the risk on me."

"I'm quite certain neither of you will be risking anything," pronounced Sir Wenceslas. "And I may say, both to you, Wiz, and to you, Titus," he went on approvingly, "that I find your readiness to catch up with the St. Swithin's work after the very heavy day we've had at Ramswell extremely heartening. Very heartening indeed."

Titus, who rather shared his approval, accepted this tribute complacently, but Sir Wenceslas was touched to see Merlin's face immediately suffuse with pleasure. "It doesn't take much to put young Merlin on top of the world," the Air Marshal reflected, amused and a little self-critical. "It mightn't hurt to do it a little more often."

Aloud, he said: "In any case, even if you'd reason to attack each other—and it's not as if we must expect murder to be endemic in the Operations Block now, like a cholera outbreak—it'd be folly to do anything when everybody knows you're alone together there. I think we can safely leave them to it, Sergeant."

With this common sense, even the suspicious Sergeant Hughes had to agree.

"But just the same," he told his inspector afterwards, when they were back in their office collating the day's information, "I think I'll just hang around and make sure they both get back all right from that session before I go to bed. I'd sleep easier."

Inspector Baker laughed.

"Just as you like. But I think you'll be wasting your time. I don't get the impression either of those two's really out for a fight with the other. I'll bet this isn't the first time Osborne's had that sort of trouble with that woman, and I imagine he knows well enough who'll be primarily to blame for any misbehaviour. As for Merlin, yes, he's probably been larking about a little. He doesn't look the type who needs inviting twice. But I don't think he's got anything very drastic on his conscience in that direction. He doesn't act like a man who's going round with the knowledge that it was his furtive relations with Lady Laetitia that set off the chain of events to a murder."

He looked across at his sergeant, with a slightly embarrassed twinkle in his eyes.

"How about it, Shonni? Nothing to do with any oil-paintings, but don't you think we can be satisfied with Sir Noel's own explanation of that search-party incident, and leave Lady Laetitia out of it?"

Sergeant Hughes looked stubborn.

"I'm very far from satisfied with Sir Noel and his various explanations," he insisted. "I'm almost certain Sir Noel knows all about the murder. So if Lady Laetitia didn't do it, we're left with one other alternative, aren't we—Sir Noel did it himself."

"Why are you so sure Sir Noel knows all about it?"

"That second set of keys he left in his raincoat pocket," explained Sergeant Hughes. "Remember, they all agree that when they first found Swanton's body, their immediate fear

was that he must have walked in on some sabotage or espionage attempt. Well, if Sir Noel had really thought that, he couldn't possibly have overlooked the chance that someone had been taking advantage of the keys he'd left where anyone could get them. Why didn't he own up at once where they'd been all night, and hand them over to Titus to be preserved with the bumper-handle and all the other things—unless he knew from the start it wasn't espionage, because he knew what had really happened?"

Inspector Baker considered this, impressed.

"But if that's so, why did he tell us anything about the keys at all?" he asked. "Why didn't he just say, yes he could guarantee they hadn't been out of his sight?"

Sergeant Hughes looked shrewd.

"Possibly," he suggested, "because he *did* leave them in his raincoat pocket; not when he says he did, coming back from the Block at dinner-time, but much later on, coming back from it a second time. He told us he was flustered and wasn't thinking what he was doing," he enlarged grimly. "He'd be feeling a good deal more flustered if he'd just come from murdering a man than if he'd merely had a brush with him over his wedding anniversary. I think very probably indeed, Merlin's version of the episode's quite right. Sir Noel, once having threatened to resign if he didn't get his way over the Project and knowing full well how Swanton felt about that, got scared Swanton might do something about levering him into resigning anyway. So he followed him over to the Block that night, either for innocent discussion or even deliberately to do what eventually happened. And he owns up to leaving the keys in the raincoat pocket now, because he's afraid Merlin noticed that was where he took them from when they opened up the Block together later on."

His voice was now very grim indeed.

"Anyway," he declared, "I'm sure Merlin's noticed, or strongly suspects, *something* about Sir Noel, and that's why I

think I'll wait up tonight and make sure they both of them get safe to bed. I'm not keen on leaving them alone together for too long at a stretch. I expect Sir Noel's gathered by now that you and I aren't going to give anyone any rest until *someone's* paid with his life for the murder of Victor Swanton. So it might just suit him nicely, mightn't it, if we all came down to breakfast tomorrow morning and found Merlin lying with his head in a gas-oven."

This gruesome possibility had not occurred to the inspector.

"What makes you think Merlin suspects Sir Noel?" he asked, disconcerted.

"Haven't you noticed the way his information invariably goes, when we succeed in wringing anything out of him at all? Merlin isn't noticeably keen on telling tales on anyone. Most of the time, he's as close as an oyster, and he'd have sat on that quarrel between Swanton and Ames altogether if Macleod hadn't put us wise to it. But he's not having the buck stop at Flight Lieutenant Ames. Whenever it does, he moves it on, round to Osborne. First thing of all, you remember, when you asked if any of the Operations officers might have been in trouble with Swanton, he said he wasn't going to tell you any individual instances—and then immediately told you Swanton and Osborne used to quarrel fiercely. Then, when we get up quite a good motive against Ames, Merlin promptly produces a much better one against Osborne." Sergeant Hughes shook his head. "No, I don't think Merlin's in very much doubt who did it."

The inspector was unconvinced.

"If Merlin's all that sure someone else is the murderer," he demanded, "what's he going around so guilt-stricken about?"

Sergeant Hughes smiled.

"That's hard to say. But it surely doesn't have to be because he's committed murder. There are lots of other things he could have been doing to make him feel thoroughly well ashamed of himself when his Air Marshal tells him he trusts

him blindfold. You've been in the Services yourself—you know the sort of games they get up to. He's probably running a profitable sideline selling butter and tins of jam to the holiday hotels in Yewmouth, or flogging Air Ministry valves to the local radio shops. I wouldn't be surprised if *that* was what Swanton had found out about, and what brought him to the island at such short notice. I'll tell you why I think that, too."

He sighed.

"It's difficult, with so many people directly concerned, to tell who's lying and who's telling the truth, but I take it we can at least trust Titus Oates now?"

Inspector Baker nodded. "

"Yes, I think it's safe to trust Titus. I did have the same canny ideas about money that Macleod had," he acknowledged with a slight grin, "but I checked tactfully with Swanton's widow at Ramswell, and found that, so far from standing to gain anything, Titus actually stands to lose a little by it. Swanton was contributing something to help his sister keep that old father in a little more luxury than his Service pension allows. But where does Titus come into this? Swanton didn't say anything to him about why he was coming to the island."

"Exactly," said Sergeant Hughes, complacently. "And yet Titus was Swanton's chief administrative officer. Who's the only person he'd be about to blow sky-high without consulting Titus about it in advance? Who's the only officer on the island with a high enough rank not to be dressed down in front of a fellow squadron leader? I think it *must* have been Merlin Swanton was in such a rush to come over and play hell with."

He paused triumphantly.

"If Merlin's been on some dirty little fiddle Swanton had just found out about," he ended, "that'd explain why Swanton couldn't bring himself to speak civilly to him at dinner. It'd also explain why Merlin feels so much better now he's been over to Ramswell and had a scrape through Swanton's per-

sonal files, and why he nearly passes out when policemen tell him they want to ask him questions."

Inspector Baker thought all this over.

"I suppose it's not impossible," he conceded. "Anyway, that gas-oven idea of yours is a nasty one, Shonni, and I think perhaps we ought to watch it. So if you sit up late tonight and see them all safely to bed, I'll take a turn tomorrow. Tonight," he said comfortingly, "while you're sitting up talking politics until past one in the morning, you can think of me getting a square eight hours' sleep, and you can come and wake me if those two aren't back from that Block before the small hours are over."

But Inspector Baker was not destined to get his square eight hours' sleep that night, although it was not Sergeant Hughes who came and woke him before the small hours were over.

He had been asleep for rather less than half his self-promised eight hours when he awoke to find someone urgently shaking him by the shoulder, and begging, "Inspector, come and help me."

Inspector Baker sat up in a flurry, and was a little relieved to find the anxious face into which he was blinking belonged to Sergeant Hughes's prospective next victim, Wiz Merlin.

"There's something going on again inside the Ops Block," Merlin told him, "and Dougal Macleod's missing from his bed. And I've just heard another pistol shot!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MERLIN OPENED THE BEDROOM WINDOW AND POINTED OUT across the dark lawns. At first, the inspector saw nothing, but after a while he discerned a distant pin-prick of light.

"That's a light in the Ops Block," Merlin told him, his teeth chattering partly with cold and partly with shock and worry. "You can always tell. Even with the shutters up, it gets out through the feeder outlet. When the shot woke me up, I thought at first I was dreaming—but I looked out, just to check, and there was that light. So I went down to the safe, and found the Ops Block keys have gone; and Macleod, who's the duty officer and has charge of the safe key, has gone too. I'm going over to see what's going on."

"Will you be able to get in?"

"Yes. I've got the other set of keys."

"I'll be with you." Inspector Baker went to the next-door bedroom to wake Sergeant Hughes and explain the situation while he was pulling on his clothes.

"Merlin's turning out a guard, and Maltby-Oates'll take charge of things here," he instructed the sergeant. "You go and check everyone's rooms, and see who's missing, apart from Macleod. Then stay here on the end of a phone where I can reach you. I'm going with Merlin to the Block."

Merlin was waiting for him when he got downstairs.

"I've ordered the guard and fire-picket out to stand by at the landing-stage," he told the inspector. "We don't want them milling around inside the Block itself if we can help it, so I thought we'd have the dogs over there. Don't run," he

warned him, as they stepped out into the rain. "The weather's bad, but it's not that bad tonight, and the dog-handler won't have rounded them up yet. They may be patrolling around anywhere, and if you run you're liable to have the lot on you."

His tone was very calm and efficient, but now Inspector Baker heard it break a little.

"Titus must have been right after all, and there *is* espionage behind this," he guessed. "And first Victor found out, and now Dougal—and I still haven't the first idea."

He was in the depths of despair.

"Victor once told me I was a good fair-weather captain," he confided to the policeman in misery, "and said the only reason I could boast I never had any trouble on St. Swithin's was because I don't know enough to recognise trouble when it's right in front of me. I spent days after that adding up the imprest accounts, to make sure the poor old Orderly Room clerk wasn't making a fortune on the sly. But I never thought I didn't know what was going on in my own Ops Block. Noel specifically warned me young Duggie was talking too openly for his own safety. If they've killed Doug too——"

His distress and self-blame sounded anything but assumed, and Inspector Baker, who until then had had considerable reservations about the genuineness of this alarm, began to revise his views. Merlin really did not know what was going on now inside the Block, he decided. And this probably meant, in spite of his markedly guilty manner, that his earlier assurance to Good King Wenceslas was sincere, and he had also not known what was going on there when the wing commander was murdered.

Although, for the sake of thoroughness, he had been prepared to consider Sergeant Hughes's complex solutions of the crime, Inspector Baker had not really, until then, had much doubt in his own mind as to the identity of the murderer. The obvious solutions were the ones he favoured; and when he found a man scattering fingerprints liberally over the scene of

a crime immediately after its commission, producing with a harrowed ring of realism a most convincing imaginary account of the murder and then quaking with terror every time he was interviewed by the detectives, Inspector Baker did not over-work his mind looking for other suspects.

But now, he silently acquitted Merlin of the murder. He turned to him with a certain amount of compassion.

"It's not the most sensible time to start torturing yourself on those lines, Squadron Leader Merlin," he suggested. "Let's concentrate on straightening things out first, shall we, before we start distributing the blame?"

Merlin nodded.

"Yes. Don't worry, I'm right with it. Whoever's in there, they're not going to get away with it this time. I think we've got them pretty well boxed up. But, Inspector?"

"Yes?"

Merlin still sounded very unhappy.

"I don't think we ought to set the dogs on them straight away, without warning. That seems a little uncivilised, doesn't it? What I've got in mind, once the dog-handler arrives, is to try going in first by myself, and see if I can fetch them out peacefully. Have the dogs ready in case of trouble, I mean, but not drag them in if we don't need them."

In the dark, Inspector Baker wasted a raised eyebrow.

"Do you want to get killed too?"

The sub-commander's first reaction to this blunt suggestion was an involuntary and socially embarrassing belch of pure fright, which he hoped the inspector did not hear.

"Oh, I don't think anyone'd do that!" he exclaimed.

"You don't know. Are you armed yourself?"

"No, of course I'm not armed." Merlin's anxiety disguised itself in a snarl of irritation. "And I hope you're not, either, if you're coming inside the Block. It's bloody dangerous, banging about with guns in a roomful of cathode ray tubes. I won't have it. That's why I don't want a pack of Alsations

roaring round the place either, if I can prevent it," he explained more quietly. "If we set someone fighting for his life against three vicious dogs in there, particularly now he's got another pistol, there's no answering for what might happen. The place might get smashed to atoms."

He wavered and then decided, "Yes, I think it's worth trying a parley first. I can't believe—they know me so much better than Victor—I shouldn't think any of them'd really shoot me out of hand. Don't *you* come in—they might be readier to take a pot at a policeman—but I think they might listen to me. If not, you can send the dogs in just the same, but at least we'll have tried."

"Is the equipment worth all that much?" queried the inspector, discomposed.

"Oh yes. Even intrinsically, it's worth quite a bit, and it's a prototype too. It's all hand-built, and it'll be a sort of three-dimensional blue-print for the rest of the defence chain."

Inspector Baker yielded.

"If you feel you must. But you do realise the risk?"

Poor Merlin realised that all right, he decided, as they reached the Folly door. They found the three guard chains, as they had expected, unlocked and hanging apart, and it took the sub-commander an extremely long time to find and fit the correct key into the lock of the door.

"When the dogs get here," he instructed, his voice commendably more steady than his hand, "don't let the dog-handler himself into the Block unless it's absolutely unavoidable. The dogs are quite capable of holding anyone in check until you can get Titus and Bob Ames across to cover up the equipment and the charts. It's a bit silly," he apologised, "but it's the rules. Not that any of it could possibly mean anything to the dog-handler, but he isn't supposed to see it, all the same. And give me a fair chance to talk terms before you let the dogs loose, won't you? We'll have a better chance of pulling it off if we don't panic them."

They waited a few unpleasant and nerve-racking minutes, until a busy panting announced the approach of the handler and his three leashed dogs.

"Wait here, and take your orders from the inspector," Merlin instructed him; then, pulling the door open, he peered nervously inside.

"Not the Ops Room itself, anyway," he whispered to Inspector Baker. "It's the loft, I think. Come on in."

The inspector followed him into the building, leaving the door ajar and the dogs within hail just beyond it.

The Block's entry hall was in darkness, and so was the Operations Room beyond it. The Operations Room door was closed, but there was no betraying shaft of light underneath it. The door to the office was closed too, and the room obviously in darkness, but from the ceiling just past the office door, a square shaft of light was illuminating the hanging ladder leading to the loft.

Merlin crossed to the ladder quietly, and began a soft ascent, But under his weight, the ladder creaked betrayingly, and there came a sudden scrabble of tiptoeing footsteps overhead.

Merlin, a few rungs up the ladder, turned a very scared face back towards the inspector. Inspector Baker motioned him in dumb-show to come down and stand aside, to leave the way clear for the dogs to make the investigation instead. Merlin looked up again, hesitated and half began to come down. Then, bracing himself, he shook his head, motioned the inspector to stand out of vision and courageously continued his climb.

As his head reached the loft floor-level, Inspector Baker heard a terrified Hebridean voice hiss "It's Wiz!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS NOT SERGEANT HUGHES'S FAULT THAT HIS PROTÉGÉ should be rousing Inspector Baker for help in the small hours of the morning. Sergeant Hughes had kept his vigil faithfully, and had not gone to bed himself until he had seen Merlin and Osborne retire their separate ways peacefully for the night, soon after midnight. But it had not occurred to him there might be a need to guard against trouble after that time.

After Inspector Baker had gone to bed, the sergeant had spent a pleasant hour in the Officers' Mess ante-room, where he had discovered Sir Wenceslas Jones and Titus Oates in comfortable conversation over a mellowing bottle of whisky. They were the only two occupants; for the four junior officers, who were never altogether comfortable in conversation with an Air Marshal, had prudently deserted the Mess at a respectably early bedtime hour.

Titus, who, diagnosed Sergeant Hughes, had been rather more upset by the disclosure of his brother-in-law's family poverty than he would have been at having to provide himself with a motive for the murder, was easing his feelings by pouring out to the sympathetic Sir Wenceslas a long and slightly boring recitation of the family history of the House of Swanton. Sergeant Hughes's private impression was that, apart from providing a pearl among women to be the mother of Titus's blue-blooded children, the Swantons had not really done very much to distinguish themselves in their five hundred years of traceable history. But they came, Titus boasted with gentle aggressiveness, from a line quite as old as, and certainly

a good deal more respectable than, the line of the permit-fiddling Earl of Yewmouth, in spite of any twentieth-century lack of bank balance.

Sergeant Hughes, like every good Welshman alive, revelled in this sort of conversation: and he was boasting in his turn of his own family's illustrious if nebulous descent from the princely Welsh house of Llewellyn when Noel Osborne and Wiz Merlin came back and interrupted the parade of pedigrees.

The resilient Merlin, who after a reviving evening among the radio valves was eager to be friends with everyone, began immediately to press a noisy claim of his own to descent from an even more illustrious and nebulous figure in Welsh history. But Noel, who did not approve of ancestors, made no attempt to join in. Instead, he obligingly employed his Air Vice-Marshal equivalent talents to making tea for the sergeant and the Service men. Then, taking a tray with another teapot and a plate of sandwiches, he went apprehensively to his four-poster bed, to tackle his contemporary family troubles with the disreputable daughter of the House of Yewmouth.

He found Laetitia lying apparently immersed in sleep when he twitched aside one of the heavy hangings of the bed. She did not stir at the light this let in upon her, and she did not answer when he spoke her name in a shamed, conciliatory tone. He told her hopefully, "I've brought some tea up for you," and brushed her cheek lightly in an experimental kiss, but she still gave no sign of consciousness.

He examined her face with guilty anxiety, and was relieved to see that there were no signs now of the angry red weals he had imprinted there earlier.

If he could have been sure she was really asleep, he would have woken her, to make his peace. But if the sleep were feigned, he thought dismally, it might be better strategy to let her wake from it at her own pace rather than his.

He left the curtain drawn back, and began moving about the room, undressing as noisily as he could and heaving fre-

quent, heavy-hearted sighs, in the hope of rousing her from a genuine slumber or melting her from a feigned one. But she still made no move and finally, sitting before the Countess of Yewmouth's ornate dressing-table to give his red, curly hair the hundred strokes which were its nightly discipline, he appealed openly and miserably, "Tish, if you're only pretending to be asleep, couldn't you pretend to wake up now and let me say I'm sorry? I feel so awful like this, and it's after midnight now, so it's our wedding day."

At this Laetitia, who was indeed awake, very nearly sat up and surrendered. "But it *is* after midnight, damn it all," she remembered resentfully, and told him in silent vindictiveness, "No, my lad, you're not coming to me hot from the arms of Little Eva. You've felt awful quite happily for five hours, so you can jolly well lie in the dark and worry about it another five minutes."

He sighed piteously again, came over and studied her earnestly, awarded her another tentative kiss and enclosed her in the bed-hangings. Then she heard him trailing dejectedly round to his own side of the bed.

The bed had been built in more spacious days, and Laetitia was lying on one extreme edge. Noel arranged himself submissively on the other edge, and went to earth under a mound of blankets. Laetitia lay hard-heartedly for a few minutes, waiting to let the lesson go home to him. Then, ironically, the sleep she was feigning with such steadiness stole upon her in reality, and she awoke with a start, she could not tell how much later, to hear Noel breathing in the deep, regular rhythm of genuine sleep.

She sat up, conscience-stricken, felt for the light switch and gave him a gentle shake.

"Oh, Noel, wake up! We mustn't really go to sleep still quarrelling."

Noel stirred, smiled uncomprehendingly in a general fog of affection, and clutched momentarily at the arm with which

she was shaking him. "Yes, love," he mumbled in benevolent, indiscriminate agreement, half turning towards her. But he was too deeply asleep to rouse himself further, and, relaxing his grasp, he settled down again.

Laetitia shook him less gently.

"No, you mustn't go to sleep again. I won't let you go right through the night like this. Wake up."

This succeeded in penetrating his mists of slumber.

"What is it? I was asleep. You always wake me up when I'm asleep," he accused her fretfully. Laetitia's urgency was relieved by a little giggle, and she apologised. "I'm awfully sorry, my darling, but I can't help it. I can't wake you up any other time. Oh Noel, let's stop being so silly. You know perfectly well it was all teasing, about Wiz. I don't give a damn for anyone in the world except you, even when you do the sort of thing you did tonight. You should know that."

She got no further, for she was tight in his arms, and they clung for a long minute of apologies and reassurances. Then Noel, drawing away shamefacedly, said reproachfully, "But, Tisha, you know, some of it is your fault. Sometimes I think you deliberately set out to make me lose my temper, when you know it makes me do things I'm thoroughly ashamed of. I can't think how you can do it. I'd never deliberately be unkind to you."

Laetitia drew away too.

"But you're worse," she counter-accused him. "You're unkind when it's not deliberate, and that's much worse. You never even know when you're hurting me or not. Every so often," she complained, "you surface and become conscious of me if I'm ill or having a baby or otherwise being a nuisance to you. But otherwise, I'm just there at the end of a hard day's work, like the arm-chair and the newspaper. You don't make me part of your life at all."

"That's not true," he defended himself, shocked. "You're

part of it all the time. I know it's lonely for you here on the island, but I did warn you I'd be working and you would insist on coming. I know I'm very busy just at present, but it's not true I don't bother about you. I love you very dearly. And how do you think I feel," he demanded pathetically, "when I see you playing around with fellows like Wiz Merlin, who are lively and good-looking and your own age and class, when I know I'm nearly forty and boring and dull for you, and my own father couldn't stand me and I've got red hair and five false teeth?"

The final item on this hysterically mounting list of shortcomings was so devastating that he was not sure whether to laugh at it, or burst into tears. Laetitia was not sure, either, so she threw her arms round him again, and told him, "My toothless old Red Knight, I'd rather be bored with you than thrilled with Wiz any day of the week; as you very well know, or it'd have been Wiz you hit this evening, not me, now wouldn't it? You're just fishing, Noel."

"I can't afford to go hitting Wiz," said the undeluded Noel. "He's twice my size, and besides, he's a great help to me in the Project. Which is more than you are," he rounded on her, going back to his grievance. "Other men have wives they owe everything to, and put things in their autobiographies about, saying but for whose unfailing encouragement and support, none of this would have been possible. But you, you go out of your way to make it all *impossible*. When I try to talk to you about my work, you laugh at me, and if I come home tired and depressed when things aren't going well, all you do is quarrel with me because I haven't come home earlier. And you never let me win the quarrel," he reproached her, aggrieved, "because you won't argue reasonably—because you daren't; because you know, if you did, I'd win, because I'm always in the right."

He said this entirely seriously, and Laetitia made a heroic effort not to laugh at him this time.

"Noel, dearest, you don't need anyone's unfailing encouragement and support," she told him, "You're quite obsessed enough about your second laws of thermo-dynamics without anyone else encouraging you, and you'd go pounding ahead to where you want to get, if the whole world rose solid against you. You want someone to cool you off a bit, not egg you on. And I can't let you go winning all our quarrels, or you'd swamp me. Of course you'd win, if we argued them reasonably, because you're a trained logician, and I'm not. But it doesn't mean to say you're right, just because you can argue better. And even if you *are* right," she ended more seriously, "you really oughtn't to hit me, you know, Noel, if you can't win any other way. Why, I could get a divorce on that without any other evidence at all."

He sat up in extreme alarm.

"A divorce? What do you want a divorce for? You're not serious about that great lout Merlin, are you? Oh Tish, you're not really fed up with me? What can I do? I can't stop working, with this conference coming up on Monday and the mods not half finished yet. Oh Tish, just wait a few weeks, and it'll be quieter, I promise. Don't start talking like that."

Laetitia ran a calming hand over his maligned red hair.

"My darling misunderstood genius, don't talk like an absolute pinbrain. Of course I don't want a divorce. All I said was, it'd be grounds for one if I did."

"Well, it was an extremely stupid thing to say," flared Noel, still agitated.

It was only a figure of speech. Don't get all stirred up over nothing. And don't call sweet, inoffensive little Wiz that great lout Merlin, either. It doesn't sound at all nice, and there's no need to be jealous of Wiz. All that nonsense about age and class—you ought to be ashamed of yourself, you old all-men-are-equal! Wiz is no more my class than yours; his father's a vet, I think—anyway, something frantically worthy and professional middle-middle. As for being my age, I wish we were.

Wiz is nearly two years younger than I am, and he treats me like his kind elder sister."

"No, he doesn't," said Noel, very definitely.

Laetitia gurgled.

"Well, he tries very hard to, poor poppet. He's a good boy really, if you insist on it." She gurgled again at the disapproving look Noel gave this piece of levity, and reassured him, "There's no need to get all burned up over Wiz, Noel, honestly." She sighed dramatically. "Wiz loves another."

This, Noel did find a little reassuring.

"The night we arrived," Laetitia told him, "and you deserted me for your Little Eva woman until very nearly midnight. Wiz and I spent a happy hour together alone in the ante-room, and he got charmingly pickled on a very few pints of beer, and insisted on telling me the story of his love-life. It was fascinating, but it's awfully fraternal, and he's more or less never stopped ever since. Whenever we get three minutes alone together, I get another long dose of this dreary Other Woman. I've finished with Wiz." Noel succeeded in finding his ferret's grin for this, and it widened as she added, "I'd rather have the bashful police inspector with the sulky eyes now."

She turned to him, suddenly serious.

"Noel, talking of the police inspector," she asked, insistently, "there *is* one thing you could do for me, if you really want to make me feel happier."

"You know, I'll do anything."

Laetitia's voice caught betrayingly, and Noel saw to his amazement that she was desperately in earnest.

"Then you can stop frightening me to death by keeping on pretending it was you shot poor Victor Swanton."

The self-pity in his eyes gave way to blank astonishment.

"My dearest girl! Now *you're* talking like an absolute pin-brain. You've not been frightening yourself about that, surely? Why, you know where I was at four minutes to two that

night; sleeping right here beside you, in this bed. How could it have been me?"

Laetitia heaved a long sigh of relief.

"Were you, Noel? I wasn't sure. I wouldn't say this for the world to my shivery police inspector, but you can't really tell, you know, once you're asleep. I couldn't truthfully guarantee where you were at four minutes to two. All I remember was drifting off to sleep before you even got into bed; and the next thing I knew was waking up to find Titus dancing like a dervish telling you to do-hurry-up and not keep these Bishop Bradbury people waiting, and you all calm and dignified in a pair of socks saying 'My dear Titus, even if it's the Archbishop of Canterbury, I must put on a little more than this. I'm not Queen Victoria'." She laughed at this memory, but then added seriously, "I couldn't even be sure, you see, whether you'd ever been inside your pyjamas at all that night; and I don't suppose, truthfully, you could be very much surer about me, if we had to alibi each other."

Noel's astonishment turned to indignation.

"But you know perfectly well it wouldn't be me, Tisha! How *could* you be worrying over a thing like that? You know I don't believe in taking human life in any circumstances."

Laetitia sighed again, half admiringly and half in exasperation.

"That'll be a wonderful defence in court when you've finally taken one step too far over the fooling-about mark with these policemen, and they arrest you."

Noel awarded this his most ferret-like furtive grin.

"Don't you worry about that, my girl. I'm not stupid. I'm not giving anyone the chance to arrest me for anything. I'm taking particular care not to overstep the mark with the police, and I've made them take down a statement in writing that I didn't do it, so they can't claim I'm trying to make them think I did. I won't get involved in any real trouble, I promise you."

"Yes, but Noel, why get involved in any sort of trouble at all? Not letting Titus search the room, and then telling Taffy-the-Search-Warrant it was you who kept Victor away from the Block. Noel, it isn't a time to try being funny. They might really suspect you."

"I'm not trying to be funny," Noel abruptly turned grave. "But you see, my darling, I happen to know who really did commit this murder, and my beliefs about human life being as good for the public executioner as they are for anyone else, I don't propose to stand by and see him hanged for it, if I can save him."

This time, Laetitia's sigh was wholly exasperation.

"I might have guessed. Of course, Sir Know-all would happen to know a thing like that. This chief inspector from Scotland Yard hasn't a clue, because all he's got are full statements off everyone, lots of fingerprints and twenty years' experience. But *you* know, of course. Really, Noel, I ought to know better than to listen to you by now."

He heard her out mildly.

"Well, I do know," he said, unrepentantly, at the end. "You see, I've got one advantage over the inspector's twenty years of experience. He wasn't there when the murderer gave himself away, and I was. That's all."

Laetitia's eyes widened.

"But, my darling, that could be frightfully dangerous for you! Who was it—does he know you know?"

"No fear," said Noel promptly. "At least, I sincerely hope not." His eyes narrowed, and he added unkindly, "That isn't the sort of secret I'd care to have the most inoffensive character in the world know I was sharing with him."

At his choice of adjective, the colour drained from Laetitia's face.

"Oh Noel," she asked, in a sick whisper. "Surely not Wiz?"

He made no answer, and she pressed him: "I've been telling Wiz all the time that no one could possibly think it was him

who did it. Are you sure? How did he give himself away? I don't believe you."

"It's true, I'm afraid," said Noel, soberly. "I was in the Ops Block, almost as soon as we'd found the body. Of course, with the first thought of espionage, my immediate reaction was to fly straight to the receiver I'm working on, to make sure no one'd been interfering with my modifications. But I suppose, to be fair, that wasn't the most essential thing to be checked, and I think friend Titus thought I ought to be being more helpful and public-spirited. Titus himself was very busy arresting the tins of floor polish in the washroom and Wiz began repairing the broken telephone cable. So Titus called out to me, would I please find the Operations Block Diary and see if Swanton had had time to sign himself in before he ran into trouble."

He smiled savagely.

"I was just going to do it when I caught sight of your sweet, inoffensive little Wiz. I almost didn't need to worry about the public hangman for him. I thought he was going to die of pure fright, there and then. He just managed to croak out 'I'll get it,' Noel', and he shot off to the Ops Office to fetch it. He was quite a minute or more before he got back, and I pretended to be too deeply immersed in going on with his cable repair for him to notice what he looked like. He was shaking like a leaf. He just handed me the diary, and I chirped fatuously, 'Oh my, there's a page torn right out of it.' Then Titus came bustling in, while I was holding it, and I showed it to him. So Titus arrested the diary too, and while he was cross-examining the tear through his spectacles, poor Wiz tottered out to the washroom and was as sick as a dog. I went out and helped him over it before Titus could come back and see the state he was in. But I'm pretty sure Wiz didn't think I'd cottoned on to him. He just said he was awfully sorry, he'd never seen a dead body before, and I just sympathised."

"Oh Noel, how dreadful." She looked up at him in alarm.

"But you haven't told the police you found the diary like that?"

Noel grinned.

"Titus has," he said happily. "I just haven't contradicted him."

Laetitia was horrified.

"But, my dear, that's most fearfully risky. That's hampering the police in the execution of their duty, and you can go to prison for it. You mustn't do any more of it," she ordered him. "Leave Wiz to look after himself. He seems to be doing it quite intelligently. If the police haven't found any proof against him by now, they're obviously not going to, so there's no need for you to go round deliberately diverting suspicion to yourself."

"You don't know the police as well as I do," Noel answered gloomily. "You've no idea what they're like. If they once get the idea it's Wiz they're after, and they don't reckon he's a good, natural-born liar, they won't bother about finding proof. Your bashful inspector friend will just take him aside for a fatherly chat and ask him, if he had any accident with that pistol, wouldn't it be wiser to tell them exactly how it happened and clear it all up. After an hour or so of that, they'll wind up with a written statement full of half-truths and excuses that'll hang poor Wiz as high as Haman without any other proof at all."

Laetitia looked at him, aghast.

"How horrible!"

"Yes, it's not very nice. And now we've had it all out, let's try and forget it. I'm sorry Wiz should have done a thing like that, but it doesn't alter his whole character and he's still exactly the same person he was before he did it. So I don't propose to let it make any difference in my relations with him, if I can help it. The Project can't afford to lose Swanton and Wiz at one fell swoop, and we've just got to go on working together. So I'm trying to school myself," he told her

earnestly, "not to think of him as The Murderer, but simply as the same Wiz he was this time last week."

Laetitia shuddered.

"Poor Wiz! He isn't a proper murderer. He's had an awful lot to put up with from Victor Swanton, and I don't suppose he did it on purpose—not premeditatedly on purpose, I mean—even then. I shan't let it make any difference, either—or I'll try not to." She turned to him distressfully, and wailed suddenly, "But it will! Oh darling, and it's our wedding day, and I've never felt so thoroughly miserable in my life. *We're* happy, aren't we? We won't let this spoil all our wedding days for ever afterwards?"

Noel surveyed her in consternation.

"I've given you a bad shock with it," he reproved himself. "You're trembling, Tish." His red-brown eyes became very anxious. "You *do* care for him," he accused her, trembling a little himself.

She tried to smile

"Not that way, Noel. But I don't want him to be a murderer."

Noel squared his thin shoulders in resolution.

"Wait a minute," he bade her, and climbed out of bed.

She heard him rustling in one of the suit-cases he had refused to allow Titus to search. Then he drew back the four-poster curtains, and brought to the bedside table the tray of tea-cups he had prepared for her earlier.

"There," he told her mysteriously, "here's something to pull you round a bit. I really meant to produce this at dinner tonight, but we can't do that now, after what's happened. And in any case, I think it'll do both of us more good now. You're quite right—this is our wedding day, and nothing on God's earth ought to stop us rejoicing over that."

He leaned across and kissed her very tenderly, and then, with the air of a man handling dynamite, he produced from behind his back a bottle.

"Champagne," he told her, and asserted, "You see, I do think of you. I didn't come here with the modifications programme the only thing in my mind."

Laetitia looked at the bottle he was flourishing, mentally totalled the nine people it would have regaled had no tragedy intervened to prevent the orgy, and smiled very shakily on her Methodist backslider.

"Noel, that was wonderful of you," she told him very sincerely. "And—I don't mind who hangs for Victor Swanton, as long as nothing happens to bring harm to *you*. Be careful with yourself, Noel, with those police, no matter what happens to Wiz." She watched him resolutely attacking the cork, and asked with a stouter smile, "Are we really going to have it now?"

"Yes," said Noel. "It isn't in the best of taste, I know, to hold celebrations when poor Swanton isn't even below ground, and we've got his murderer sleeping peacefully next door to us, unpunished. But I won't have it making you miserable, Tish. This isn't a miserable day for us, whatever's happening. It's the happiest day of the year, and it's right we should celebrate it."

He fired the cord from the bottle with an unpractised but mechanically-skilful turn of the wrist, and it shot across the room with an explosion loud enough to wake the already half-aroused Merlin in a very great fright.

Then he filled the two tea-cups, gave one to his wife and, lifting the other with a politely-concealed grimace of distaste, drank it down dutifully, like medicine.

Laetitia, with equal generosity, raised her cup and took her medicine too.

"Thank you for seven wonderful years, my toothless old ruin," she toasted him softly, "and here's to your horrible Little Eva, damn and blast her. Long may she reign."

CHAPTER TWENTY

MERLIN'S MOST TERRIBLE FEARS WERE UNREALISED. AS HE raised his head above floor-level, there was no searing flash of pain followed by instant oblivion, nor any sign of the fire-arms he had been fearing.

But his life, he saw with cold terror, was still not given back to him. Above him, not the trembling victim but the trembling aggressor of the break-in, Dougal Macleod was poising a heavy spar of wood for attack.

"Put that thing down, Dougal, and come down to the office," Merlin instructed optimistically, with such matter-of-fact authority that, for a moment, the inspector below him thought he might even be obeyed. Dougal would have obeyed him too, but for another voice which warned him sharply, "Don't go with him, Dougie. He can't make you. Look, he's not armed." So Dougal, very shrill and very Hebridean, lifted his improvised club again and ordered, "Go on back down that ladder, sir—go on away, or you're going to get hurt."

"Don't talk like a fool," said Merlin, sounding unimpressed. He took another step upwards, and Dougal, sobbing "I warned you", swung the spar. Merlin clumsily tried to dodge it sideways, but he was trapped in the little square of entry, and the cudgel caught his head a crack the mere sound of which made Inspector Baker wince.

"Now be away off," insisted Dougal, as Merlin, with a yelp of agony, clapped a hand against the injury, and swayed dangerously from the other hand. Had Dougal then decided to enforce his instruction with another blow, he could have sent

the sub-commander crashing to the lower floor. But he made no move and Merlin, gaining courage from this, tried again.

"That's stupid, Doug. That can't help you in any way," he brought out in a flat tone, still striving to sound authoritative. "You're just making it worse for yourself, when I'm trying to help you. Come on down, and let's talk things over sensibly. You too, Pip. You might as well. There's no hope for you, going on fighting. I've got you trapped."

"No, you haven't," bleated Dougal valiantly, poising his improvised club again.

"Dougal, if you hit me once more, you'll be really for it," Merlin warned him. "I'm not bluffing. I'm not over here by myself, so stop playing the fool. It'll be better in the end if you come down and don't make any more trouble. Or if not, at least let me come up there, and see if we can sort anything out."

Courageously and none too steadily, he took another couple of steps up the ladder. Dougal breathed, "No, I don't trust you. Please, please keep away. I'll have to hit you again, else." He took half a step back and swung his club. Merlin, turning as far aside as he could, was betrayed into an unheroic anticipatory whimper of pain, and at the last moment, Dougal pulled the blow.

"You come one step further and you'll get it," he warned.

"Let me come up, Doug. You've hurt me," pleaded Merlin, half genuinely dizzy, but half in crafty, deliberate piteousness. "My head's going round—I think I'm going to fall."

Dougal hesitated and looked towards Pip Cartwright. Merlin shot a covered glance at Pip, too, and then, encouraged by what he saw, looked unsteadily down towards the hall, and waved another signal of suppression to the inspector.

The hand that made the signal came away from his head blood-streaked. It left the blood, too, free to run down his face, and Inspector Baker, moved to active protest, was about to disobey and send the three Alsatians hurtling to avenge

him, when the sub-commander's prolonged forbearance was at last justified.

Dougal, also seeing the blood, 'dropped his club, his face white and horrified.

"Come on up, Wiz," he agreed, leaning down and putting a steadying arm under his victim's shoulder. "Pip, help me quick, I think he's going to pass out. You'll be all right now, sir," he reassured Merlin, as gently as a mother. "Just lie back with us a while, and don't worry about anything. It'll all be all right, I know. I'll away down and fetch the first-aid box, and you just take it easy meantime, with Pip."

Pip, equally white and horrified, hurried to assist him.

Then Inspector Baker heard Dougal query in a low, grave tone, "What'd I best do, Pip—phone straight through to that Scotland Yard, inspector. Or shall we tell Titus Oates and leave him do the arresting?"

The inspector's hand froze on the door-handle, and Merlin, who had been about to indulge himself in a swim into semi-consciousness, sat up in Pip's arms with a jerk.

"Dougal, you bloody maniac," he bawled in tremendous relief, "what the hell are you up to, over here at this hour of the night? Do you know I damned nearly set the dogs on you?"

Dougal and Pip gaped at him blankly. Then Dougal's hand fluttered to his mouth.

"Are you not the murderer, then?" he gasped.

"Don't be bloody ridiculous. We thought *you* were. Do you know, you might have been torn in pieces? You might have been killed. The inspector's got a pistol with him—you might quite easily have been shot dead! Do you know that?" Merlin, weak with relief, stormed furiously. "What the devil do you think you've been doing?"

"We thought you were the murderer," stammered Pip. "We heard you creeping into the Block and not putting any lights on or signing in or anything. And then seeing this light

and coming creeping up the ladder at us—oh, Wiz, we thought, it must be the murderer! Oh God, I'm frightfully sorry. I thought you were going to take us down one after the other and shoot us."

The sinister appearance of his own movements, from the vantage-point of an innocent witness in the loft, had not until then occurred to Merlin.

"But what are you doing here anyway?" he insisted.

Pip swallowed and looked at Dougal, but Dougal appeared to have been struck speechless.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," Pip apologised again. "It was this trade-test business of yours with Dougal tomorrow. Dougal didn't feel quite happy he'd followed everything Bob was teaching him in the dark-room, and he thought he'd like to run over a few things again before he had to go through any test about it. We—I didn't think you'd have any objection."

Merlin looked at him helplessly.

"But, my dear Pip, why at this hour of the night? If that's all it was, why couldn't you come over after dinner when Noel and I had the Block open anyway, instead of frightening the lives out of everyone like this?"

"I didn't want to tell you till I'd put matters right," Dougal explained in a mumble. "It's entirely me to blame, sir, not Pip. I asked him, would he come over and help me."

Merlin remained mystified.

"But if you didn't follow it, Doug, why on earth didn't you say so to Bob at the time? That's just wasting your time and his. I just don't understand you."

Dougal looked embarrassed, and Pip loyally came to his aid.

"Wiz, not to tell tales out of school, but Bob isn't the world's best instructor, you know. Doug had a pretty rough time teaching him about major maintenance first, and by the time they got round to the dark-room, Bob wasn't in a very safe saying-so-to mood. I wouldn't have liked to tell him he wasn't making sense, if I'd been Douggie. Particularly—sir, this is

awfully tricky and no disrespect intended, but, after all, one can't quite ignore the chance Bob *may* be a murderer. It doesn't exactly encourage anyone to risk rubbing him up the wrong way when he's in a bit of a foul temper anyway."

Nothing in Queen's Regulations, or in his rather perfunctory studies for his promotion examinations, had taught Merlin the correct procedure for handling an indisputably justifiable suspicion by a junior officer that his superior might be a felon. The sub-commander put up his hand to his throbbing head, and looked dismayed as he became aware for the first time of its stickiness.

"So we just waited until we heard you and Noel come back and everyone go to bed," Pip went on, "and then we came over. It never struck us it might cause an alarm and confusion. I mean, we did all the correct things—we weren't trying any thief-in-the-night stuff. Doug signed out the keys in his duty officer's book, and we signed in, in the Operations Block Diary. And we asked the guard-room quite openly to have the dogs called in while we came over. You wouldn't do that if you were going to murder anyone, would you?"

Merlin looked at him aghast, his heart plummeting to the soles of his feet. In his alarm at the "pistol shot" and at Dougal's disappearance from his bed, he had not stopped to carry out these elementary checks.

He abandoned his recriminations without explanation.

"Go and clear up whatever you're doing in the dark-room," he ordered woodenly, "and come on downstairs to the office when you're finished."

"Yes, sir," said Dougal, desperately frightened.

Pip offered tentatively, "Won't you just let us fix your head a bit first, sir? It looks pretty rough. You oughtn't to leave it."

In spite of his troubles, Merlin relented into a faint and painful smile.

"No, thank you, Pip, not if you've been teaching Dougal

how to dabble his hands in the developer. I'd rather not be fixed, developed or in any other way touched up any more by Messrs. Cartwright and Macleod tonight. I'll feel safer in the hands of the police."

Pip, belatedly recalling the danger of the photographic chemicals, broke into a further flood of contrition, which Merlin halted with the gracious instruction, "Just shut up, and go and do what you're told when you're told."

Pip, now considerably frightened too, obeyed. Merlin descended slowly and unsteadily into the hall again, where Inspector Baker, who had been in touch with Sergeant Hughes, gave him the humiliating explanation of the "pistol shot" which had started the alarm.

Merlin sortly consigned Noel Osborne's soul to the fate the teetotal Noel himself half expected for his alcoholic excess.

"Luckily," Inspector Baker reassured him, "Sir Noel Osborne was the first person Sergeant Hughes decided to check, so, apart from your guard and fire-picket, there's been no general alarm. And Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates suggests that for the pickets, we now transform this officially into a surprise defence exercise."

"The bods'll think someone's been exercising with unusual vigour and enthusiasm," commented Merlin, gingerly inspecting his badly-bruised head in the washroom mirror. "Still, that'll console them for getting dragged out of bed in the middle of the night. It always goes down well when someone manages to hand out a black eye to the officer commanding."

He pulled out the first-aid box and tolerated in stoical silence Inspector Baker's expert and reliably antiseptic ministrations. Then, back in the office while they were waiting for Pip and Dougal, he burst out less stoically, "Oh God, Inspector, this sort of thing always happens when there's an Air Marshal on the station. But what would *you* have done? Noel was nattering at me all evening about letting Doug go round talking too much for his own safety, and then getting woken with a bang

like that, and Dougal not there—I never stopped to think of looking in the duty officer's book."

He brooded.

"The guard-room might have had more sense, when I told them to send the dogs over. They knew there was a legitimate party here, because they'd already called the dogs in for them once. Still," he reflected justly, "perhaps they didn't quite like to ask 'Oh goody, are you going to arrest Flying Officer Macleod?' I can't honestly blame anyone but myself, can I? It's an example of vertical breeze-up one normally expects from Titus."

He remembered guiltily Titus's prompt and loyal covering-up of the breeze-up, and the colour rose in his wan face.

"I suppose looking in the duty officer's book," he asked, resignedly, "was the first thing Titus did stop to think of?"

Inspector Baker nodded.

"Oh hell! Yes, I ought to have thought of it too. I forget those things every time." Merlin checked himself suddenly, shot a hasty glance at the inspector and then, leaning back in exhaustion, excused himself sheepishly, "This is my real kingdom, you know, Inspector, here in the Block, not outside playing soldiers. I'm an awfully smart disciplinarian in among the thermionic valves. You don't catch any of them going out when they're not supposed to."

Inspector Baker laughed.

"I shouldn't plague yourself too much about that," he told the dejected sub-commander briskly. "I don't think the discipline in among the station personnel's all that unsmart, either. If it were, you wouldn't find people leaving their warm beds in the small hours to catch up on their inefficiencies. They'd have just stayed inefficient for your trade test tomorrow, and let you do what you liked about it."

Merlin, a little cheered, smiled back.

"You wouldn't like to find some unobtrusive way of working that into your next idle conversation with Good King Wen-

ceslas, would you?" he asked. "Oh yes, they're all keen types, I'll say that much for them. Particularly Dougal," he reflected ruefully, running a delicate hand over his bruised and bandaged cheek. "Verra thorough and painstaking, is our Doug. He may not be a lightning-quick learner, but once he *does* latch on to anything, he always makes a good, reliable job of it. He's made a good, reliable job of me tonight, anyway," he admitted, wincing. "You know, he really has hurt me quite badly with that barbaric bit of Scottish caber-tossing."

"Yes." Inspector Baker pondered. "He does seem more than a little trigger-happy, your Flying Officer Macleod, once he gets the bit between his teeth."

Merlin, jumping at the sinister word "trigger-happy", looked up at him sharply.

"You told me every one of you had some sort of trouble with Wing Commander Swanton," the inspector reminded him. "Tell me, what sort of trouble had Macleod?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WIZ MERLIN'S MIND SPAN THROUGH THE POSSIBILITIES IN THIS new turn of suspicion, but rapidly rejected them.

"Oh no," he answered, not the direct question but the implication. "I shouldn't waste time on Dougal Macleod if I were you. I don't think it *could* be Dougal."

Inspector Baker awarded this a slightly weary smile.

"Leave it to me to waste time in my own way," he requested patiently. "You're not much prepared to think it could be anyone, when it comes down to brass tacks and specific cases, are you? Why not Macleod, more than any of the others?"

But Merlin, it appeared, was not this time guilty of merely sentimental thinking. He was reasoning, albeit the reasoning was, as the inspector knew, fallacious.

"You heard what Doug sounded like, up there just now," he pointed out. "That's what he always sounds like in times of stress. Like a hen getting run over—high-pitched and a Scots accent you could cut with a knife. That isn't the kind of voice the Turvey supervisor heard doing the threatening. He said 'Low and calm', I particularly asked him. Even if he couldn't pick out the Scots accent—the line does distort a bit under the sea—he'd surely catch the inflexion. You can check up and ask him if you like," he offered, after a moment's calculation. "He'll be on night watch again tonight—they've only two supervisors at Turvey and they're having to work alternate watches right the way through until the exercise ends on Sunday night—so if you like to come through to the Ops Room, you can speak to him yourself."

A lingering discretion over the nearly-abandoned theory of Laetitia as the murderer-in-chief kept Inspector Baker from repeating what the Turvey man had already told Sergeant Hughes—that the background voice sounded too far away to be distinguishable even between a man's and a woman's.

"I don't think so. I shouldn't like Macleod to come down and overhear that sort of inquiry," he contented himself with saying. "Just tell me what Macleod's trouble was with Swanton."

"All right. But you'll see it's wasting your time." The sub-commander looked far less uncomfortable than he had done under cross-examination about Bob Ames. "It was such a very long time ago—just over a year, in fact—and as far as my own knowledge goes, Macleod's never had any serious friction with the C.O. since then. It was last October, actually, only a few weeks after the Service had taken over the Project from the boffins and Dougal and Bob and the rest were first posted in here. You remember the first Russian Sputnik?"

The inspector nodded.

"Well, as you can imagine, we were pretty closely concerned over that. We'd had wind that it was going up several days before it actually went, and we were brought on to an emergency round-the-clock watch basis, to keep an eye out for it. That was a pretty big strain on the equipment, which until then hadn't tried out any prolonged full-time operating. So, inevitably, it started giving me a few teething troubles, and, after soldiering on for nearly a week, I saw I'd got no choice but to go over to Malvern and pick up a few extra spares. I had to go myself because Dougal at that stage hadn't the experience to know what was wanted. But it meant a night away from the island and that, in turn, meant leaving poor Doug in sole technical control here until I got back."

He laughed.

"I don't have to tell you what happened. That sort of thing's always fated. Not only was the one night I picked the

same night the Russians picked to get weaving, but to add insult to injury, it was also the night Little Eva picked to break down altogether.

"You can imagine the pandemonium. On the one hand, deluges of most-immediate signals from Whitehall to Ramswell, saying there were Moons, Red, One, Geo-physical year for the celebration of, orbiting outer British territorial atmosphere and could we please send them everything we could get on it. On the other hand, good old Little Eva right off the air with a fault that defied everyone's efforts to locate. I was innocently asleep at Malvern—although, needless to say, I was rudely kicked out of bed and sent on my way at top pressure. Noel Osborne and his research team were all squatting on the top of Snowdon with another inspired Sputnik observatory Noel had strung together. As soon as the fault looked like being a major one, Victor Swanton himself came rushing to St. Swithin's, in company with a tame civilian we keep at Ramswell in charge of radio-counter-measures. But this fault baffled even the R.C.M. expert.

"Well, Dr. Veale's very far from a time-waster, and he soon saw they weren't getting anywhere by orthodox text-book methods. The signals were still flooding in from Whitehall, so in despair Veale suggested the favourite remedy most over-worked mechanics suggest when they're really up against it; to stop trying to trace the fault theoretically, cut out the safety-switch and leave the power full on, and just follow it up until you can see for yourself where it's coming to grief."

"Isn't that rather dangerous?" asked the inspector.

"Yes, it is. If you by-pass the safety cut-out, and you happen to touch the wrong spot while you're testing, you're quite liable to be fried to death. In consequence, messing about with the safety cut-out's a pretty serious Service offence, and there are all sorts of rules and regulations about not doing it. But old Veale reckoned that desperate situations require desperate remedies, and he also reckoned that, if you've an

ounce of common sense and you know the power's on, you don't touch the wrong spot and kill yourself very often. So that's what he was going to do."

He smiled gingerly again.

"Not so, Dougal, though. He's a lad of rigid principles and a certain amount of impressive moral courage. Veale's a pretty senior boffin, and Victor, of course, was Dougal's commanding officer. But he told both of them quite flatly that while he was responsible for the technical side of Little Eva, there'd be no breach of safety regulations, thank you. Rules were made to be obeyed and it was Dougal's plain duty to see that they *were* obeyed. And that's what he stuck to, no matter how much poor Vic stormed and raged and prayed over him."

"Was he entitled to do that?"

"Oh yes. Entirely within his rights as the duty technical officer. Nobody could suspend him from duty for enforcing the technical regulations, though I think Vic would've had a jolly good try at it if he hadn't known I'd be there to disobey them before he'd time to do anything drastic against Dougal."

"So what happened? Did Little Eva miss the Sputnik?"

Merlin's surviving grey eye—the other was rapidly closing completely—took on a wary evasiveness again. But this time, the inspector recognised it as a laudible wariness to safeguard Project security and not to safeguard *Wiz Merlin himself* from the chance of a charge of murder.

"Oh, well, these satellites," said Merlin indulgently. "They're like women and buses. If you miss one orbit, there's another one along in a minute. We picked it up all right eventually. And the ensuing result to our poor Ops Block had to be seen to be believed. You couldn't move in here after that for fear of treading down a Cabinet Minister or a First Sea Lord or something. We had so many V.I.P.s in and out, we were using Good King Wenceslas to hand the tea round."

He became even more guarded.

"Then Noel Osborne arrived, having come skidding off the

top of Snowdon as soon as he'd heard we could plot the satellite. And that was the first time I began to realise there was this terrific high-policy split over the Project's future. Some of the V.I.P.s, you see, hotly supported by Victor Swanton, were all for preparing a detailed chart of all our observations on the orbit, and publishing it as early as possible in the Press of the world. I was a little surprised, actually, at some of their reactions. My personal feelings were—I may be a bit dim—that the Sputnik was Rung Number One on the ladder to outer space, and just three rousing cheers for whoever it was who'd set foot on the rung. But some of them, Victor included, looked on a Communistic moon stooging round England as a personal insult to Western culture, and a great diplomatic setback for democracy. So they wanted to publish this chart as a mild indication of how far on the ball Britain was when it came to outer-space missiles, too. But Noel peremptorily put a stop to all that."

"Did he?" Inspector Baker's Special Branch curiosity in Noel Osborne began to stir again. "Why?"

"Technical reasons," said Merlin, carefully uninformative. "Fear of jamming, chiefly. Little Eva's still rather wide-open to radio counter measures, and in those days she was even more vulnerable. But Victor Swanton, with his terrific anti-Red complex, couldn't be expected to appreciate that. He merely took it as one further proof that poor Noel was a deliberate fellow-traveller, and didn't want the forces of democracy to have a diplomatic victory in exchange. He was bitterly disappointed about it—they'd come so near to deciding quite definitely they *would* publish it. So afterwards, he could hardly wait until we'd got the Prime Ministers from underfoot before setting in to tell Noel exactly what he thought of him."

His open eye had a slight twinkle.

"Of course, Service decorum," he pointed out, "prevented him from telling Noel openly, but he couldn't bear not to tell

him at all. So very cleverly,* he took it all out on Dougal. He asked Dougal very smoothly what he'd got to say for himself over the earlier fiasco with the technical breakdown. And poor Dougal walked straight into it. He said in his uncompromising Calvinistic way, he had nothing to say, he still considered he was in the right. So Victor let fly with a magnificent stream of vulgar abuse, every word of it meant exclusively for Noel Osborne's benefit. He said something like: 'All right, you snivelling, canting, self-righteous, gutless, sapless, Non-Conformist teetotaller, you go ahead and hide behind the rules. But I warn you, there's no room in this Project for anyone who's scared to take a reasonable risk with the technical troubles at times; and one of these days, you'll put one fraction of a whisker outside the cover of Queen's Regulations, and I'll be there waiting for you?' *

He paused, reflecting that this narrative might not, after all, be the best way of persuading anyone that Dougal was an unlikely candidate for the wing commander's murderer. But Inspector Baker's interest was no longer on Dougal Macleod.

"Was Sir Noel within hearing of all that?" he asked curiously.

Merlin laughed.

"Oh, yes. That's what it was all in aid of." He stopped laughing abruptly as he realised the sinister drift of the question. Then he became even more actively unhappy, as the door opened to admit the two junior officers and their photographic equipment, and he saw the state to which the night's alarm had reduced Dougal.

Pip Cartwright was looking almost himself again, but Dougal's face was as ashen as Wiz's own, and he was in the grip of a slight but uncontrollable shivering, as if he had been standing about for too long in an icy rain. Merlin saw that he was struggling against the effects of almost unendurable shock and strain, and it occurred to the sub-commander guiltily, for

the first time since the body was discovered, that Squadron Leader Merlin was not the only person on St. Swithin's Island to have his nerves stretched to breaking-point.

A stark vision of the future rose in his mind, of a succession of junior officers turned out by St. Swithin's to man the new chain of defences, never quite able to master their duties, because they had never been able to feel quite at ease trying to learn the basic principles from instructors they feared might be murderers.

Dougal ran his eye mournfully over Inspector Baker's tidy and extensive bandaging, and his mouth drooped like a baby's. Pip, approaching the sub-commander with the photographic record-book and the prints they had been developing, requested with meek formality, "Would you sign for our roll of film, please, sir? It's non-secret—the routine instructional sine-waves."

Merlin glanced at the prints.

"These aren't too bad, Doug," he tried to hearten his fellow-technician. "Nice and sharp, anyway. We've got *something* useful out of this romp, then, at all events."

Dougal, ignoring the commendation but grasping at the olive branch, brought out in one fervent gasp, "Oh, Wiz, I'm so dreadfully sorry. I never meant to hit you one half as bad as that. But you're so much bigger than me and you would keep on coming—I was scared for my life. Are you going to be all right?"

"I think I'll live," promised Merlin cautiously. He broke into a reassuring smile, and sympathised lightly, "Poor old Douggie, you look all shook up. Yes, it must have been just as scarifying for you as it was for me." He lapsed into a broad Negro dialect, and quoted in a chant, "Who's up dere saying who's down dere, when I'm down here saying Who's dat up dere?" Then, seeing Dougal still trembling, he offered handsomely, "Well, I'm sorry, too, Doug. It was mostly my fault, I expect, if we're telling the brutal truth. So let's all crawl

back to bed now good friends, and then tomorrow we can all pretend it was terribly, terribly funny."

"Then I'm not under arrest?" asked Dougal deeply relieved.

"Under arrest?" Merlin's thoughts swung back to the unpleasant realms of murder charges. "Why should you be?"

"Why, for striking my superior officer, sir."

Merlin, deeply relieved, grinned more spontaneously.

"No, we'll let you off that one, this time. Just don't come near enough to give him a chance to strike you back, that's all. If you do, you won't be round again in time for Christmas, and it'd disorganise us terribly if we hadn't got a pagan Scotsman to hold the fort during the leave period."

As it was then mid-October, this might have been construed as a pleasantry, but the abashed Dougal offered seriously and humbly, "You can hit me back if you'd like to, Wiz."

"Thank you. But not before an inspector of police," Merlin declined discreetly. "Let's wait until the next dining-in night at Ramswell, shall we? You needn't worry you're going to get away with this altogether," he promised savagely. "First time we get one of those jolly party games like high cockalorum under way, and I can pass it off as all good clean fun, you're going to get a hiding you'll remember all your life for the fright you've given me tonight. You and Pip both," he added, remembering the diplomatically self-effacing pilot officer, now apparently absorbed in putting the camera back in its leather case and hanging it on its correct hook, under the extremely interested gaze of Inspector Baker. "In parallel or in series, I'll take you on either way you like."

Pip, much re-inspired by this vigorous threat, begged him "*Kamerad!* But we really are sorry, Wiz, both of us. It was a fool thing to do at a time like this, we realise that now. I'd like to apologise to the inspector, too," he said, a little uncomfortable under the detective's thoughtful stare, "for dragging him out of bed for nothing."

Inspector Baker shook his head.

"Don't apologise to me," he answered, promptly. "It was very far from for nothing, as far as I'm concerned. Tell me," he asked Merlin abruptly. "How long did you say this Naval exercise goes on for?"

Merlin looked at him blankly.

"The Naval exercise? Ten days. Last Friday to this Sunday night, so the reservists can join in at both the week-ends."

"And how long have Sir Noel and Lady Laetitia been down here?"

"They came on Monday."

"If Sir Noel were not here, working on these modifications," the inspector demanded, "would you have been able to continue your Uncle Tom rocket-duels in the normal way, or would the Naval exercise have put a stop to them anyway?"

Merlin considered him, troubled and mystified.

"No," he said. "We go right off the air for things like that. It's too risky not to, with submarines and E-boats popping up in the area from nowhere, at a minute's notice. But why?"

Inspector Baker did not bother to answer that, for he had more than a suspicion that Merlin knew why.

Wing Commander Swanton, the inspector remembered, knew all about Exercise Whirlwind when he called for help over the Topsy line; and if Exercise Whirlwind would have put the Project off the air for ten days in any event, then the offensive remark which had so upset Noel Osborne had nothing to do with wedding anniversaries disrupting the Project training.

And Merlin, Inspector Baker further remembered, could not have been very far away when the offensive remark, whatever it was, was uttered. Squadron Leader Merlin, the C.I.D. man decided grimly, must be called to account for his vague and casual proposition that Noel might have been alarmed of

Swanton's making a lever of Laetitia's visit to eject Noel from the Project altogether.

He cast a scrupulous glance at the wan and exhausted squadron leader, and decided in mercy to grant him a respite that night, to sleep off the worst effects of his fright and his physical injury.

In doing so, he unwittingly saved himself from the unpleasant task of having to browbeat the truth out of a reluctant and unco-operative victim; for, before the next twelve hours had elapsed, the conscientious island sub-commander, Project loyalty at last triumphing over terror of the gallows, had come to him voluntarily with the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MERLIN HAD TO OVERCOME CONSIDERABLE QUALMS BEFORE facing his colleagues at breakfast next morning.

It would be embarrassing enough, he reflected as he came down the white staircase, if it had only been in the awareness of the fool he had made of himself the night before. When it was also in the knowledge that this might be the very last meal he would ever take with them, and that by lunch-time the Mess president might be taking his meals in the isolated company of the C.I.D. men under close arrest, the entry was almost impossible.

He found himself very much the last arrival at the table. The others were just finishing the meal, and the office of toast-maker had already been assumed by the chastened Dougal, who had also had to overcome qualms before appearing.

Merlin smiled sheepishly as he encountered the gaze of Good King Wenceslas. Even in the depths of despair, he could still find it in his bruised and bewildered heart to laugh a little at the contrast between the eager-beaver efficiency displays he had been planning for the Air Marshal's benefit, and the sorry figure he would actually cut when the night's alarms came to be reviewed.

Then, flinching under the battery of eyes that had swung in unison to his freshly-bandaged head, he fended off the attention of his staring subordinates with the first piece of self-conscious badinage that came into his head.

"First one who laughs," he warned them with uneasy levity, "six months' Bishop Bradbury without the option."

This was a time-honoured Project threat. The weekly tours of duty as fire-control officer were the most unpopular in the Project's roster; for, in addition to the fire-control itself being dull, the spell at Bishop Bradbury also involved a formidable round of out-of-hours administrative duties. The Sector commander, an elderly traditionalist, disapproved of having two subordinate formations too secret for him to be allowed to inspect, and it was his pleasure to make the Project specialists "jump about a bit" whenever he got them on his own territory.

Irreverent jokes at the expense of a senior formation, even time-honoured irreverent jokes like this one, were perhaps not the most decorous conversation for a subordinate commander to make in the presence of an Air Marshal. But the guilty glance Merlin shot across the table the moment the words were out of his mouth was not at Good King Wenceslas.

Bob Ames, in the act of lifting a cup to his lips, froze motionless, and his gaze held Merlin's in one long, spellbound moment of mutual horror.

"So Bob knows what Swanton's threat was all about!" realised Merlin, with a sinking heart. "Not suspects—knows. Now I shall have to go to the police—or he will."

He turned away, and began to examine the side-table array of breakfast pots and dishes with an interest he was very far from feeling. Then the comfortable voice of Good King Wenceslas broke into his shocked thoughts.

"No one's laughing at you, Wiz," the Air Marshal assured him, heartily. "Not so's you'd notice. It'd be more orthodox, certainly, to have a look in the duty officer's book before assuming the duty officer must be off getting himself murdered every time he's out. But, seeing you didn't look in the book, it was just simple bad luck for you there was anything there to be looked at, wasn't it? If there hadn't been, no one would have thought of asking you afterwards whether you'd looked. You'd have succeeded or failed in your peaceful picketing last night, and this morning I'd be writing you out the appropriate

recommendation for the George Medal for what you'd done; or the George Cross, if it'd turned out to be a posthumous one," he ended with cheerful cynicism. "They usually hand out a better one if you're not around any longer to pick it up."

This magnificent commendation, in place of the resigned disapproval he had been expecting, robbed Merlin of words. He was further overwhelmed by Titus, who added encouragingly, "And your defence pickets put up a cracking good show in their turn-out, too, Wiz. I confess I found the security routine on St. Swithin's much tighter than I'd been giving you credit for. If there *had* been anyone unauthorised in the Block, he'd never have got off the island."

Wiz was too grateful even to resent the unflattering surprise in Titus's voice. He was still struggling to find words of acknowledgment when he caught a low, worshipping voice murmuring in his ear: "My hero! May I have your autograph?" and turned in relief to find Laetitia plying him with a much-needed cup of coffee.

Merlin, who never learned from his domestic disasters, turned on her his most trouble-free, seductive smile.

"You—you secret drinker," he accused her, in tones of the most devoted compliment. "I've nothing at all to say to you; oh, except many happy returns of the day, of course," he amended politely, as he remembered the anniversary. "Of the day, mind—not of the night. Never you do a thing like that in your lives again, either of you, or we won't let you come and dust books with us ever again."

He sent a belatedly inclusive smile, towards Noel, which Noel acknowledged tranquilly. Titus, who in spite of his security-test benevolence still did not think Laetitia's book-dusting expedition a fit subject for levity, put a prompt but tactful stop to the topic by asking concernedly, "Do you think you ought to be up and about yet, Wiz? I'd have thought you'd be wiser to stay in bed a little, and let us fetch the M.O. over to have a look at that head of yours. You're not con-

templating facing that rough boat-trip to go and see him, surely?"

Merlin's smile turned wry.

"I'm not contemplating seeing him at all," he replied. "It's quite bad enough having all St. Swithin's revelling in the knowledge that one of the officers has just beaten up another with a blunt instrument, without inviting the Bishop Brad sick quarters to join in the fun as well. This is all right by itself. Corporal Terry says it's nothing he can't cope with."

Titus looked dubious.

"Still—a medical orderly. Wiser to let a proper doctor have a look," he pronounced. "And I think in any case you'd be better for a spell in bed. You don't look up to much, you know."

Wiz shot a mischievous glance at Noel Osborne.

"My overlooker won't like it if I have any more time off," he told Titus.

Noel, who was a Spartan himself and expected everyone else to be, certainly looked none too enthusiastic at the idea. But he repudiated, in a grudging and unconvincing way: "Oh, I shouldn't like you to feel you must turn out on my behalf, Wiz, if you don't feel up to it. We're still behindhand, of course. But if the worst comes to the worst, I can always get one of the Research Group off his own work to ~~come~~ down and help out."

"He'll only have to come down off the North Pole, and trek out here through the rainy season—it'll be no trouble at all," enlarged Laetitia, in exactly the same grudging tone. "No, you go your own selfish way back to your bed of pain my dear boy, and don't spare a thought for poor Noel. He'll manage somehow. Why not tell the old slave-driver to go and jump in the sea," she suggested, reverting to her normal soft coo, "and do as your Uncle Titus tells you? Nobody's indispensable, Wiz duckie, so you needn't start flattering yourself you are?"

"No, I'm all right, really," protested Wiz, his smile momentarily outshining his troubles again at the sight of the effect of this piece of advice on both Noël and "Uncle Titus". He glanced apprehensively at Inspector Baker and Sergeant Hughes, placidly saying nothing and enjoying the conversation, and added less light-heartedly, "I've got a lot of things to get through this morning. I can't stay in bed."

He turned casually to Bob Ames.

"Bob, when we're through with breakfast, will you come over to the Ops Office with me, please? I'd like a word with you before we get too immersed in the mods programme."

Bob appeared to freeze again.

"This morning, Wiz? You haven't forgotten I've got this dental appointment, have you? The boat's due off at nine-thirty, and if I miss it, I'll miss the ration wagon too."

He looked anxiously at the sub-commander, and Wiz saw with a flood of pity that he was desperately afraid.

"Would it be all right," Bob asked meekly, "if, say, I haven't shown up at the landing-stage by twenty-five past, young Jo comes over to the Block and routs me out? I don't want the boat to go without me."

"Yes, all right. You'll do that, Jo, will you?"

"For a small fee," agreed Jo, obligingly, and Bob looked inexpressibly relieved.

"As a matter of fact," Wiz told him slowly, "I *had* forgotten your dental appointment. But not to worry, Bob. I shan't stop you catching that boat."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MAKING BRAVE RESOLUTIONS FOR THE GENERAL GOOD OF THE Project, Merlin found, was one thing. Getting up the nerve to put them into practice was altogether another.

Standing forlornly at the door of his own administrative office, trying to summon the courage to knock, he remembered with guilt the many times he had arrived for duty casually five minutes late, to find some unhappy airman sweating outside that same door, waiting to be charged with an offence. But there was something to be said at least, the sub-commander reflected enviously, for the Service system which did not mercilessly leave a man to present his own neck for the axe. He would have been grateful now for a raucous-voiced N.C.O. to take the plunge for him, and hustle him willy-nilly at the double to the interview he hardly dared begin by himself.

Lacking this active assistance, he braced himself to knock faint-heartedly, and walked in, to find Inspector Baxter disconcertingly already engaged. With the C.I.D. man, to Merlin's dismay, sat Good King Wenceslas, looking unexpectedly studious in a pair of reading-glasses, and occupied in a delicate censoring of some of the police photographic negatives with the aid of a paint-pot and brush.

Merlin hesitated in the doorway; and Good King Wenceslas, who had just been regaled on Sergeant Hughes's theories about butter and radio valve peculations and was finding this idea slightly more unpalatable than the idea of murder, looked up at him apprehensively.

"I'm sorry," stammered Merlin. "I ought to have rung

through from the Block. I didn't think you'd probably be busy." Courage deserted him, and he stepped backwards towards safety. "I'll come back later," he offered with relief.

Good King Wenceslas took one swift, knowledgeable look at him, and doubted if, once he found himself on the other side of that door, he would ever dare to reach as far again.

"Better come in now, Merlin, and get it over, hadn't you?" he suggested, steadily. Merlin still hesitated, and the Air Marshal added gravely, "We've been waiting for you all morning. Don't keep us waiting any longer."

His subordinate came slowly into the room, and shut the door deliberately behind him. Then he leaned back against it for a moment, with his eyes closed.

"I'm not the murderer, sir," he pleaded to the Air Marshal, in a low, shaken under-tone. "On my word of honour, I'm not."

"My dear Wiz!" Good King Wenceslas was shocked instantly out of his inquisitorial manner. "No one's suggested that for one moment. If that's what's bothering you"—he glanced towards Inspector Baker for confirmation—"you can put it right out of your mind, straight away. We don't suspect you of that."

Merlin was not heartened.

"You will do," he forecast gloomily. "when you've heard what I'm going to tell you." Good King Wenceslas began a patient if slightly exasperated denial, but Merlin cut him short, not over-politely. "It's no use, sir. I know perfectly well the inspector's suspected me since the moment he saw my fingerprints all over the Operations Room. And you—you," he burst out in a sudden and long-pent eruption of rankling distress, "you picked me out as the murderer before the murder ever even happened."

Good King Wenceslas stared at him blankly.

"You told Victor Swanton yourself," Merlin accused him, "that if he didn't watch out, I'd lay him dead in a ditch."

The Air Marshal started guiltily.

"Good God," he ejaculated, appalled. "Did Swanton tell you that?"

"Yes, he did," said the sub-commander, deeply aggrieved, "and I can't imagine what I can have done to give you a shocking impression like that. But if that's what you thought of me before, whatever you say now"—indignation tailed away into despair again—"I'm under no illusion what you're going to think when you hear the rest."

He turned to the inspector.

"Inspector," he began resolutely, "the statement I gave Titus Oates about my movements on the night of the murder—I'm sorry, but that wasn't true. I didn't go to bed when I said I did, and Victor Swanton wasn't by himself when he went over to the Block. I went with him. I'd like to give you a correct statement now and," he added with difficulty, "I'd like to apologise for having told you so many lies before."

He sent a conscience-racked glance in the direction of Good King Wenceslas and offered, "I'd particularly like to apologise for that to *you*, sir. I'm very badly ashamed of myself."

Good King Wenceslas, shaken beyond speech, said nothing. Merlin turned back to Inspector Baker, who was reaching automatically for a pencil, and begged him nervously. "You don't have to write it down straight away, do you? Couldn't I tell it to you first, and write down what you want afterwards? It's difficult—I want to tell you exactly what happened, because some of it may be important, and I see now I can't go on withholding important evidence from you. But Vic Swanton was my close and lifelong friend, and"—his voice was very unsteady—"it's going to be hard, having to tell you what sort of terms we parted on, in the end, I'll do the best I can, but I don't think I can do it if I have to watch you take notes while I'm talking."

Inspector Baker put down the pencil.

"Very well," he agreed, not without compassion. "Take your own time."

Merlin came up to the desk, but shook his head at the chair the inspector proffered.

"If your sergeant's still trying to discover who it was who deliberately delayed Swanton from going to the Block," he began, "he's wasting his time. That wasn't the murderer. It was Swanton himself. He knew I wanted to go over there with him to discuss something, and he was trying to delay it until it was too late to have the discussion out properly."

"Are you sure of that?"

Merlin nodded.

"Yes, I'm quite sure. That's why I went upstairs to my bedroom, when he still didn't move after the television had closed down. I could see then he was deliberately sitting me out, and I didn't want to egg him on any longer. So I went off and waited upstairs instead, and when I intercepted him later, just as he was setting off, he told me himself he'd been doing it on purpose."

"What was this discussion about?"

Merlin gripped the back of the empty chair with two tightly clamped hands.

"I'm going to marry Clare Swanton—you may as well know it," he announced, with a jerk. "Victor knew that evening I intended to pin him down about a divorce, and he didn't want to be pinned down."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Good King Wenceslas, and Inspector Baker recalled the Air Marshal's innocent description of tea-parties where Merlin was "frightened even to talk to Mrs. Swanton about the weather, in case Swanton gave him his come-uppance". He recalled, too, belatedly, the prim references of Titus and Mrs. Titus Oates to the "good taste" and "propriety" of Merlin's presenting himself as chief mourner and comforter of the widow, and mentally kicked himself for missing the obvious significance of those. Even the

refined Maltby-Oates vocabulary, he realised, probably contained more adequate phrases than these if they had thought Merlin was the murderer.

Merlin also observed the Air Marshal's reactions.

"I'm not ashamed of myself for that," he excused himself with a trace of defiance. "It wasn't treachery. I don't know whether you knew it, sir, but Clare was engaged to me before she married Victor, and he took her off me with a very dirty trick."

Good King Wenceslas looked more and more thunder-struck.

"I certainly didn't know it," he declared, energetically. "If I had done—well, I'm sorry, Merlin, but you wouldn't have come into this Project under any consideration. Feuds that develop as you go along are quite enough of a nuisance, without importing any ready-made. I wouldn't have dreamed of letting you in, if I'd known. But in those days, of course," he recalled, "we hadn't started any serious screening."

"We weren't feuding, sir," denied Merlin, hastily. "When I came into the Project, I'd no idea what he'd done to me, or I wouldn't have come in myself. But I didn't find out until more than two years later, when Clare and I eventually pieced everything together. And by then," he shrugged, "it was three years old, and the Project was vitally important, and we'd already put in two years' close partnership on it. You can't start up feuds in those circumstances. If Clare and I hadn't found that we had to be free for each other, I wouldn't have let Victor know I'd discovered about it at all." He looked squarely and appealingly at the Air Marshal, and told him, "I'd have done almost anything not to get thrown out of the Project, and"—he raised a travesty of his usual carefree and friendly smile—"I'd been used all my life to Victor Swanton taking things off me if he wanted them himself. I wouldn't have held that against him, as such. With things like that, it's every man for himself, I know, and it was Clare's father's fault,

really, more than Victor's, for imposing such a ridiculously long engagement on us."

He scowled.

"You know him, I believe, sir." He's an M.P.," he told Inspector Baker, "and a terribly pompous old coot, and when I got engaged to Clare, he said I wasn't earning enough to get married on. I was a flying officer then—this was nearly four years ago—and I was twenty-three, so we wouldn't have been entitled to the full marriage-allowance scale. Not that that would have mattered," Merlin pronounced dispassionately. "I know plenty of people who get married on a flying officer's pay without having to go on National Assistance. But he'd got ideas about keeping up standards, and he wouldn't let me have her until I could support her in the luxury to which he was accustomed. And, as she was only nineteen, that was that. We just had to wait until I was twenty-five, when I'd have got my next promotion and come on to the proper marriage-allowance rate.

"I think really," he judged honestly, "the old boy wasn't frightfully keen for her to marry me at all, and he hoped, given time, we'd cool off. He wasn't over-impressed with my prospects. He told me that as a technologist I'd have done better in industry, and as a Service officer I ought to have joined an executive branch. But he wasn't quite man enough to show me the door honestly and openly. He wouldn't let us announce our engagement officially, but he let us have what some people call an understanding. I was allowed to have meals with the family, and that sort of thing, and to take Clare out and about. And sometimes, I took the family too, and that's how they all came to meet Victor Swanton. I used to take them to the various social functions on my station, and Vic was my C.O."

He sighed.

"I was a fool. I ought to have seen it coming. Victor was so very much everything Clare's father thought I ought to be,

and wasn't. He'd got out of the specialist ruck well up on the executive ladder, and he'd been on all the right staff courses already and got a command of his own. And he wasn't really all that much older than Clare, though at the time it seemed a pretty safe distance to me. He was thirty. Of course, I did notice him shooting a pretty assiduous line to Clare's father, but I paid no regard to that." Another brief smile crossed his face. "It was part of Vic's normal success system to shoot assiduous lines to people like the local M.P."

He closed his eyes.

"If he'd fallen in love with Clare too," he brought out, "it wouldn't be quite so bad. But he didn't. He fell in love with the M.P. I suppose it dawned on him that a father-in-law like that, with bags of pull and influential friends, was a valuable asset to an ambitious Serviceman. Far too valuable," he reflected desolately, "to be wasted on a fool like Flying Officer Merlin."

"What happened then was my own fault, I know. If I hadn't given him the opportunity, he couldn't have done it, and I know I deserved all I got. But one evening, somebody'd got a promotion and there was a bit of a celebration laid on at a local roadhouse. Nothing very Sodom-and-Gomorrhish, really," he said, defensively, "but I didn't tell Clare about it. I knew there'd be a fair number of local floozies there, and it wasn't the sort of party people expect you to turn up at with the daughter of the local M.P."

There was so long a pause that Inspector Baker was almost about to prompt him. But he broke it himself.

"But she did turn up," he related unevenly. "You see, that morning, Victor had met her in the town, out with her mother buying theatre tickets to entertain some friend who was visiting them from South Africa. Knowing what sort of a party we were going to have—he deliberately recommended that roadhouse to them as a good place for supper after the theatre."

He hesitated again.

"It wasn't *that* disreputable, what we were doing," he protested, as if he were protesting it to the outraged M.P. himself. "The place was a bit smoky and badly ventilated, and the band was a bit sleazy too, so it looked worse than it was. We'd been tanking up a fair amount, and we'd got these girls with us. I was dancing with one myself when Clare and her party suddenly arrived—a ghastly blonde with a slit skirt and spike heels, and those stockings that have little black snake-things crawling up the instep. I wasn't doing anything but dancing, but you know the way that sort of girl dances. And—oh well, you know the sort of way you go on at that age, at that kind of a party, when you get a bit high."

Inspector Baker cloaked an unkind smile. Having seen the sober, twenty-seven-year old Merlin's habitual manner even with the relatively decorous Laetitia, he thought he knew very well the sort of way Merlin would go on; and he awarded the late Victor Swanton full marks for generalship, if not for comradeship.

"Clare wouldn't even let me see her to apologise," Merlin related brokenly, "and four months after that, she married Victor."

He turned to Good King Wenceslas.

"Perhaps, after that, I shouldn't have accepted his offer to come into the Project," he acknowledged, "and perhaps he shouldn't have made it. But by then, there seemed nothing against it. He'd been married nearly six months when he told me about the Project, and I thought I was getting over it. I'd applied for a posting when Clare wouldn't make it up with me, and the new station I got to was terribly uninspired. When Victor offered me the chance of coming back with him, I never hesitated. Whatever he was, Vic was a magnificent man to work under, and the Project itself sounded wonderful."

His sorrowful thoughts lightened a little.

"And, of course, it's *been* wonderful," he reminded himself devoutly. "If I'd the same choice to make again, even knowing all this, I'd still choose to come and have done this last three years' work."

He lowered his glance again.

"As for Clare," he said nervously, "I didn't deliberately set out to make trouble. But we couldn't avoid it. It was all right at first, before the Service took over the Project. Vic began by asking me home, but when he saw how the land was lying, he pretty soon packed that in, and Clare and I did try to steer clear of each other. But once Victor'd taken command and we'd started tracking all these Sputniks, it was impossible. People—V.I.P.s—kept swarming down from London to have a look at them, and often Victor had to entertain them at home, and I had to be there too. So we couldn't get away from seeing each other."

A more resolute note came into his voice.

"And then, after a while," he said, unashamed, "it seemed stupid even to try. If more than three years hadn't changed anything between us, it was obvious nothing would now. We made one or two abortive efforts to go on pretending we were all just friends—and poor Vic did that all the time. But it wasn't even fooling him, much less us; and eventually we agreed the only thing to do was to tackle him about a divorce.

"That was early this summer, when all these major upheavals about Project policy were going on in London. Victor was up to his eyes in work over those. He was desperately keen to see it handed over to N.A.T.O. and he was flogging himself half-silly over that campaign. So I didn't think it was fair to land him with a domestic crisis at the same time, and we were waiting until that was settled."

Good King Wenceslas, who was not anxious to have the major upheavals about Project policy paraded in too much detail before the inquisitive eyes of the Scotland Yard Special

Branch, frowned at him rapidly, and then presented an expressionless face to Inspector Baker as if he had not stirred. Merlin looked conscience-stricken.

"But this week," he said cautiously, "when Noel Osborne arrived, I gathered from him that the business was settled anyway; settled far enough, at least, to start having conferences with industry, which meant that the debating storms must have died down a lot. So I wrote straight off to Clare, telling her we'd no reason to hold back any longer, and at the same time I wrote to Victor, telling him there was something I wanted to come and talk over with him, and asking him to fix an evening. Those letters arrived first post on the day before the murder, and I had an idea Vic'd guess what it was all about. So I wasn't really surprised when he rang up abruptly that morning, and told me he was coming to the island. I naturally took it he was coming about that, and I also naturally took it that his threat at the dinner table would certainly be meant for me."

He paused uncomfortably.

"But, as a matter of fact, I was quite wrong about that. It wasn't me Vic was breathing fire and slaughter against then. It was one of the others."

He paused again, and Inspector Baker prompted him helpfully: "Flight Lieutenant Ames?"

Merlin's one serviceable eye opened wider.

"Did you know, then?"

"You've got to get up very early in the morning to take in Sergeant Hughes," Inspector Baker told him complacently. "Much earlier than a nine-o'clock breakfast. He was wide awake this morning." He surveyed the astonished sub-commander indulgently and added unkindly, "Much wider awake, apparently, than Squadron Leader Merlin. What did you suppose was dragging him over to Bishop Bradbury this morning at such short notice?"

Merlin gaped.

"He told me," he stammered foolishly. "He asked me to fix up for him to see that boat party of telephone kings. He said he was going to get some written statements off them."

Inspector Baker nodded sapiently.

"He probably thought," he hazarded, "that if he said he'd got a sudden attack of toothache, perhaps you might think there was something fishy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FOR A FEW SECONDS, MERLIN CONTINUED TO GAPE. THEN HE responded to the gentle sarcasm with a sheepish and uncertain smile.

"Yes, of course. That was very dim of us." The smile widened with such good-nature that Inspector Baker felt a little ashamed of himself, and Merlin conceded ungrudgingly, "Yes, we were playing right out of our league there, weren't we? We're used to the Titus technique—when he's on to anything, he looks up at the ceiling and whistles." Good King Wenceslas awarded this an un-Air-Staff-like grin, and Merlin apologised to the detective. "But I'm afraid we've probably wasted Sergeant Hughes's time over that, all the same, Inspector. I don't think Bob did it, after all."

Inspector Baker looked taken aback. He had been pinning a few easy hopes on a quick solution from Bob Ames and Bishop Bradbury.

"Oh!" he inquired politely. "And what's changed your mind since breakfast?"

"Bob himself." Merlin directed another awkward glance at Good King Wenceslas, and explained. "You see, when I saw Bob jump like that at the mention of Bishop Bradbury, I knew he must know what had brought Victor over that day. But he couldn't have found out before the time of the murder, because Vic was never alone with Bob in the Mess all evening, and never intended to be. He arrived here in a barely-controllable blazing temper, both with me and with Bob, and he didn't trust himself to say anything to either of us until he'd

slept on it. He told me that himself, later on, and it was quite true—even in company, he couldn't behave himself properly to me. I had the most dreadful evening with him."

A flush of anger momentarily brought colour to his face.

"From the time he arrived," he said, "he kept tormenting me in the most savage and horrible way; calling me a professional home-wrecker, right in front of Titus and Pip Cartwright, and making the most outrageous insinuations about what I was doing with Laetitia Osborne while Noel was working. And Noel himself—Victor was abominably rude to Noel too, in a most deliberate and unprovoked way. I could see he was at the end of his tether. That was why I was so keen to get him over to the Ops Room in private and let it break. I'm not like Victor myself—I can't sleep on things. I have to get them over straight away. But, anyway, Victor certainly wouldn't have been able to tell Ames quietly and unobtrusively what he'd come for, without everyone in the Mess being aware of it."

"What had Ames done?" asked Inspector Baker.

"It wasn't Bob himself. It was Bob's girl. I did tell you, didn't I, he's engaged to one of the W.R.A.F. at Bishop Bradbury, and he's been trying for an exchange posting to Ramswell, so they could get married? And that Victor refused to sanction it?"

The inspector nodded, and Merlin turned his troubled gaze back to the Air Marshal.

"I hope you won't hold this against Ames, sir. He knew nothing about it at all. And I imagine the girl herself was only acting on a very stupid and reprehensible impulse. She's a rather intense type, but I'm sure she didn't realise the enormity of what she was doing. Girls, particularly girls in love, don't think like normal, rational human beings.

"But this girl's the Sector Commander's P.A., and, the morning before the murder, she was sent over to Ramswell with some D/O correspondence. Unluckily, she arrived to find

Victor alone in his office, and the adjutant, who should have been protecting him from these hysterical females in the outer office, was off somewhere out of earshot on an errand. So catching Victor alone like that, she thought it was an ideal opportunity to have another last shot at trying to melt his heart."

His face shadowed.

"She'd picked the wrong time, of course. Victor'd just got my letter asking for this conference with him and Clare, and he wasn't feeling soft-hearted about the emotional entanglements at St. Swithin's. So he was more adamant than ever before. Only, this time, he wasn't dealing with an ambitious and obedient flight lieutenant with a future to consider. He was up against a quick-witted and determined little red-headed lady pilot officer, who didn't give a twopenny damn whether they kept her in the Service or threw her out, as long as she got her man. So, when she saw that she wasn't getting anywhere by respectable methods, she pulled a rather shocking blackmail on him."

Merlin himself sounded considerably more than rather shocked, and Inspector Baker wondered respectfully what powerful variant of the "If-you-don't-I'll-scream" blackmail the lady pilot officer had evolved, so to scandalise this free-and-easy ex-roadhouse Romeo.

When Merlin told him, even the rock-like Good King Wenceslas blanched.

"She said," reported Merlin, in hushed horror, "that if he wouldn't give Bob the exchange, she'd write to every newspaper in Fleet Street and tell them exactly how the Service was forcing two innocent young lovers to live in sin with each other instead of getting legally married as they wanted."

"God Almighty!" ejaculated Good King Wenceslas piously, and Inspector Baker could see him already mapping out painful answers to Questions-in-the-House about the resultant three-inch headlines in the tabloid Press.

"It's all right, sir," Merlin soothed him, with a slight smile. "Vic fixed her. He told her that, sooner than see her do that, he'd post Bob to the mainland on the next P.O.R. and she wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Only, he wouldn't give him the Ramswell posting they wanted. He said he'd create a special new establishment just for Bob, as the permanent fire control officer at Bishop Bradbury. It'd be a flight lieutenant establishment, and, as far as Vic was concerned, Bob could stay there for ever and ever, as long as Vic was the Project Commander."

"A flight lieutenant establishment," asked Inspector Baker, "meaning a permanent block to promotion?"

Merlin nodded, and the C.I.D. man rounded on him in exasperation.

"But that's a most strong and obvious motive for the murder. What in the name of all that's crazy possessed you not to report that at once, when first I asked you about Ames?"

He had not intended to sound quite so hectoring, and he regretted his impatience, both altruistically and tactically, when he saw how pitiably his victim quailed.

"I couldn't. It didn't seem right," faltered Merlin. "Not while I was holding back such a much stronger and more obvious one of my own. And I'd no proof Bob knew anything about it, much less that he'd go and shoot Victor over it. In fact, I've still no proof. Bob says he didn't find out by bearding Victor in the Ops Block at four minutes to two. The first he knew about it was when yesterday's post arrived from Ramswell, and there was a letter from Margaret—the girl—telling him about it."

"Did he show you the letter?"

"No, he couldn't. When he read what was in it, he saw what you'd think of it, if you ever found out, so he destroyed it. He thought he could fiddle this attack of toothache to get across to Bishop Bradbury and warn Margaret to keep her

mouth shut. But Pip Cartwright remembers taking him the letter to the Ops Block yesterday, and it's true the attack of toothache began straight after that."

This time, Inspector Baker kept his temper.

"Does he know you're coming to me with this?"

"Yes, I told him I'd have to."

"Then why does he have to go over to Bishop Bradbury just the same?" Merlin looked at him blankly, and the inspector reproved him, "That wasn't so smart, Merlin, was it, letting him get away with that? Now, we'll never be able to establish definitely where he got the information from. If that letter he got yesterday came from his old school chum up in Newcastle, we'll never know it now, will we, providing his girl's ready to back him up. I don't suppose Sergeant Hughes'll be as close on his heels as all that."

Merlin, marking with a fluttering heart the omission of the courtesy of his Service rank, stammered, "I didn't think of that. I just thought—well, I wouldn't have liked anyone stopping me going to Clare yesterday," He glanced at his watch. "I'm very sorry. I'm afraid it's too late to phone through to your sergeant. Bob was going to see her before the dentist, and the dentist was at eleven."

"You're a great help!" sighed the inspector. Merlin bowed his head meekly, and Inspector Baker was struck by a sharp doubt. Or wasn't Merlin so smart, he wondered abruptly? If Ames's information had genuinely been gained through the letter, that could never be established beyond doubt now, either.

He remembered Bob's anxious request to Jo Cartwright to come and find him if he disappeared in Merlin's company for too long, and wondered how wide awake Squadron Leader Merlin had really been at breakfast that morning. If Swanton had been avoiding explanations with both Ames and Merlin, it must have occurred to Ames to wonder at what stage Merlin himself could have acquired the Bishop Bradbury information.

And Ames, Inspector Baker, reminded himself, was the one, so anxious not to be left "carrying the can" that he built cases to Sergeant Hughes even against the innocent and sorrowing Titus Oates. The inspector wondered how much of these damaging admissions he would be hearing from Merlin now, if Merlin were not afraid he would get wind of them in any event from Ames.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

INSPECTOR BAKER SURVEYED THE DROOPING, SUBMISSIVE figure before him challengingly, and then, for the moment, shelved the riddle. If Merlin were trying to outdo him, he reflected grimly, he had succeeded that time.

"I'm not sure Victor would have gone through with that, anyway," offered Merlin, charitably. "I believe the Bishop Bradbury big stick was being flourished at Bill Merlin, rather than Bob Ames. When Vic told me about it, he mentioned very pleasantly I might think it a waste to keep a flight lieutenant in that job, but not to worry—he'd do exactly the same with a squadron leader if he started making a big enough nuisance of himself. And that," the sub-commander related with every appearance of deep reluctance, "led to something very worrying he said about Noel Osborne."

"What was that?" Inspector Baker, at this confirmation of Merlin's consistent suspicions of Noel Osborne, felt his trust in the sub-commander's own innocence begin to return.

"Well, when he began this browbeating about Bishop Bradbury, I dug my heels in. I told him he couldn't pull that on me—I was technical. And that made him angrier still. He said, 'Technical—don't *you* start this technical nonsense as well. That's an amulet that isn't going to protect you indefinitely. The country's not that short of technologists.' Then he suddenly stopped trying to bully, and said quite conversationally, 'Tell me, Wiz, you know Commissar Osborne much better than I do. How far do you think he'd really go, if it came to losing his place in the Project?'

"I was afraid, as I've already told you, he was thinking of making trouble for Noel over Laetitia's permit. So I warned him, if he started trying to shift Noel out of the Project he might make more trouble for himself than for Noel, because Noel, when all's said and done, is a departmental head, and Vic was only a wing commander, for all his nerve. But he told me, 'Too late. I'm going to shift him. He isn't a departmental head—he's a little Red rat, and no amount of earls' daughters can succeed in making him anything else. The Project's far better without him than with him, and I'm going to fix Commissar Osborne if I die for it. He doesn't scare me with his threats.'"

Inspector Baker sat up.

"'If I die for it' might be the merest figure of speech," he observed sensibly. "Did you ask him what threats?"

"No, I didn't. Noel says he never threatened him at all. But I think he must have. Noel does make very wild threats sometimes, without meaning them, and it's quite likely he wouldn't even remember. But Victor didn't mean it as a figure of speech."

Torment ravaged his face.

"I'll try and repeat to you exactly what he said," he told the detective, "so you can judge for yourself. It was very abusive—I don't like to think about it, because it makes me feel terrible after what happened. But I'll try and tell you.

"I didn't want to take sides between Victor and Noel, and I told him so. I said I hadn't come out to talk about Noel and couldn't we please talk about Clare?"

"He swore at me. He didn't usually swear at all, but he did then, and then he said 'You self-centred young belly-acher, you won't take sides with anyone over anything, will you, until I'm hanging over a lamp-post and you're off to Siberia to dig salt-mines. Rats like Osborne are capable of anything—I might get shot, do you hear that? But you

haven't come out to talk about that; you'd rather talk about stealing my wife. You don't take sides—when I'm dead, you'll send a wreath of white lilies to Clare and a bouquet of red roses to Osborne, and step happily into my shoes in the Project and my bed at home, won't you? I believe you'd quite cheerfully do the shooting yourself, if you thought Clare'd still take you after you'd done it."

Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"This next thing sounds terrible," he warned them unsteadily, "but I beg you to believe me—I didn't mean any harm. I honestly only meant to act in Victor's own interests. I never for one second thought anyone had threatened him seriously. I thought Noel had just loosed off at him wildly, like he sometimes does, and Vic was just feeling generally sorry for himself. But I did think it was a terribly foolish way to talk, in a room where he knew there was a loaded pistol."

The C.I.D. man's face froze into blankness.

"I didn't mean even to scare him. But I did think he needed a lesson. With quick-tempered types like Noel and Bob around, he really wasn't safe to be let go on like that. And I'm responsible for that Operations Block." He watched the inspector with another surge of terror. "So I moved past him and got the pistol out and levelled it at him. That was all—on my honour, I never fired it. I just told him not to put ideas in people's heads, when he knew they were so dangerously easy to carry out."

He turned to the very grave Air Marshal.

"I'd never have done it, of course, if I'd known what you'd already been saying; because he immediately thought I meant it. He just stared for a minute, and then he went very calm and said, 'I shouldn't do that, old boy. You won't get away with it.' And he told me how you'd warned him specifically against me, and that I'd be the automatic suspect."

His big frame stiffened, to control a trembling he was ashamed for them to see.

"Then he gave me a most gruesome and ghastly description of what'd happen to me if I didn't put the pistol down. He was talking for his life, I suppose, but it was a terrible recitation—I keep remembering and remembering it now. All about people's physiological reactions when they were hanged, and what it'd be like if it were a Service execution and they didn't shoot straight. I was horrified—I'd never heard anything like it in my life. I put the pistol on the table and told him, 'Don't be a bloody fool, Victor. You know perfectly well I'm not going to shoot you.'"

A tear spilled suddenly from his one open eye, and he brushed it away in embarrassment with the back of an ungentle hand.

"He laughed at me," he related, angrily. "He just laughed at me, and told me 'No, and you're not going to cuckold me, either, so you may as well make up your mind to it.'"

"I started trying to argue, but he wouldn't listen. Everything I said, he said he wouldn't discuss it. Then the clock chimed for half past one, and,"—Merlin's voice broke again—"he told me he wasn't going to be bothered with me any longer, just as if I'd been pestering him for a leave pass, or something.

"He did give me a sort of half-apology then. He said, if he'd have known it meant all that much to me, he couldn't have done it in the first place, but it was too late now, and we couldn't put the clock back. He said he loved Clare himself and he wouldn't divorce her, and I must just find someone else if I wanted to settle down. And Clare——"

He began to falter so badly that Inspector Baker could hardly make sense of him.

"He said, 'Clare doesn't love you. She only thinks she does, because I'm busy and she's got too much time on her hands.' He said he'd soon remedy that—a new baby——"

His emotions defeated him.

"That may not sound anything to you," he gasped, turning his face to the kindly, shielding wall, "but you don't

know—you don't know—it pretty well ripped me in pieces. Oh God—I knew I'd never get through with this without making a fool of myself."

Good King Wenceslas half-rose to his feet, but Inspector Baker waved him back.

"That was pretty severe provocation," the detective sympathised, softly and treacherously. "About the worst you could get, wasn't it?" Merlin made no coherent reply, and Inspector Baker pressed, feeling just like a murderer himself: "And was that when you shot him?"

"I didn't shoot him," wept Merlin, abandoned to grief and despair. "I didn't shoot him. But I knew you'd never believe it."

Good King Wenceslas stirred protestingly again, but the inspector soothed him in an undertone, "It's all right, sir, just let him go on. That's one of the drowning murderer's straws—provocation. If he doesn't clutch at it, either he's not drowning, or he's not a murderer. And he's drowning, all right." He watched the defeated sub-commander unemotionally, until a needle-like stab of protest from his damaged eye robbed Merlin even of the comfort of hysteria. He clawed at the covering bandage distractedly, and recovered a little.

"What did you do then?" asked the inspector.

"I didn't kill Victor," reiterated Merlin sulkily.

"What *did* you do?"

"I got away. I had to get away—I couldn't stand that. But I left Victor perfectly alive in that Ops Office, and the pistol was in the office too, still on the table. I never thought of killing Vic, truthfully. I did think," he dropped his head, "of killing myself. But not Vic."

"You got right out of the Block, do you mean? Did you shut that outer door, or leave it open?"

"I slammed it shut. I was going—I was thinking of going straight into the minefield, along the shore, you know. It was dark, and that might have been an accident. And then

Clare needn't know, and my mother. But when I got in the open air, I got more sensible. You can't really tell, you see, how many mines might go up once you set one of them off, and there are all sorts of things you might damage, like the drains and the water main—and the telephone cable. I didn't want to plunge all St. Swithin's into domestic chaos over my private troubles. So I thought I'd skip the mines and think up something else if I couldn't get Victor to change his mind."

He turned to Good King Wenceslas again.

"There's no excuse for what I did next morning, I know," he said in a low voice. "But it didn't seem so bad, at first. You see, with a telephone cable damaged and Victor nowhere to be found, I thought at first Victor must have done exactly what I'd been going to—decided he couldn't face it, and walked into the minefield. And if he'd done that, that just had to be an accident. Anything else would have been so terrible for Clare. So I didn't want any questions about what we'd been talking about just beforehand.

"The guard-room told me when I rang to see if they knew where Victor was, that they hadn't seen him since the boat landed. So I knew the S.P. patrols hadn't seen us on our way over, and everyone in the Mess thought I'd gone to bed long before. So I just thought I'd leave it at that. At that stage, it didn't seem very serious. It wasn't until we got inside the Block and found Victor like that, I realised what a hell of a mess I'd let myself in for. I didn't dare start telling the truth then."

His face flooded with deep colour.

"When you told me you'd take my bare word, sir, I didn't know how to answer you. I knew I ought to pack it in there and then, and stop telling you all those lies. But by then, I seemed horribly committed—and you had the police with you; and I kept thinking about the hangings and firing-squads, and about afterwards—if they hanged me—being dead."

He thrust a hand against the desk to steady himself.

"Vic Swanton was one of those people you know the minute they've come into a room," he whispered, "even if you're not looking in that direction. He dominated. And that morning, while we were flapping round the Ops Block checking the things against espionage—there he was all the time, quite impersonal; not dominating, not protesting, not doing anything—just lying there, quiescently going all stiff, like a boiling fowl."

Another uncontrollable shudder racked him, but he kept his composure.

"I'm sorry, sir. I know what you must think of me, but I couldn't face that happening to me." Another of the Air Marshal's trustful tributes rose to trouble him, and he apologised miserably. "I'm afraid I'm not in the least a George Medal candidate really."

Sir Wenceslas's heavy, concerned expression lightened. This type of emotional storm he felt competent to handle.

"I shouldn't worry too much about that," he advised his shattered subordinate encouragingly. "One's first taste of carnage is always a little unnerving, even when the victim isn't a lifelong friend. You weren't in the war, and you're probably not much used to bodies yet. I can quite see it's been a pretty severe shock for you. It'd have been a lot better, certainly, to be reasonably honest from the beginning, but since you've put that right of your own volition, I shan't hold that too much against you. You're not the first man in human history, Wiz, to jib a little at his baptism of fire, and I dare say you won't be the last. The main thing is, to get over it in time for the next emergency." He raised kindly eyes to Merlin's bandages. "And you did that all right, didn't you? Let that be enough to be going on with."

Merlin's tide of gratitude was stemmed by the persistent Inspector Baker.

"How about that Operations Block Diary of yours,

though?" he demanded efficiently. "Didn't you and Swanton sign yourselves in that night?" A lingering suspicion flared in his mind, and he asked, "How was it you weren't afraid that'd give your visit away, if you didn't already know the vital page had been tidied away with the rest of the evidence?"

Merlin looked guilty.

"I *was* afraid," he confessed. "As a matter of fact, I didn't sign us in myself—we were too busy arguing to get down to that, and I never thought about the diary at all, until we got into the Block and found the body, and Titus called to us to check it."

He smiled shakily.

"I *was* terrified then. I knew Victor wouldn't have forgotten, even if I had, and I didn't know whether he'd have signed me in as well as himself, even though I'd gone. I didn't know what to do—but fortunately, I didn't have to do anything. When I checked it, I found the page had gone already—I suppose Victor signed the murderer in afterwards, as well."

Inspector Baker consulted his notes.

"But you didn't check the book. It was Sir Noel, surely?"

"No, it was me," said Merlin ungrammatically. He described the way Titus had been misled, and volunteered anxiously, "Sir Noel can bear out that I didn't know that page had gone beforehand. He tells me now that he saw through me all along."

"Very benevolent of him to keep quiet about it, then, wasn't it?" commented the inspector, unpleasantly. "Now, why do you suppose these people do these things—just because they like you?"

He gave a sudden sharp exclamation, as if he had been stung by a wasp, and asked abruptly, "Tell me, I've not seen you at your technical work. Do you and Sir Noel wear rubber gloves, or anything like that, to insulate you from electric shocks?"

Merlin stared at him.

• "Rubber gloves? No. I've never seen anyone do that."

"I meant to ask you about that last night, after I saw young Philip Cartwright putting away those cameras." He picked up the photographic negatives Sir Wenceslas had been censoring, and told the Air Marshal, "We needn't trouble you to go any further with this, sir. These pictures are going to be no good in a court of law, I'm afraid, if we can't swear all the negatives are untouched."

He turned back to Merlin, who was regarding him with utter bafflement.

"You may be a king among thermionic valves, Squadron Leader Merlin," he told him cheerfully, "but as a C.I.D. man, you're right back on the beat. Surely it must have struck you long before this," he complained, "there was something a little significant in the marked absence of Sir Noel Osborne's fingerprints from everywhere you'd most expect to find them?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NOEL OSBORNE WAITED UNTIL THE MESS WAITER HAD CLOSED the door, and surveyed the tea-time offering of toast, sturdy sandwiches and a huge and unexpected fruit-cake which was the Mess staff's tribute to the wedding anniversary.

"Is this all we're going to get?" he demanded impatiently of the Mess secretary.

Jo looked at him, a little surprised.

"Some poor children," he informed him classically, "would be grateful for half as much."

"My dear Jo!" Noel broke into shocked apology. "You mistake me—I'd certainly no intention of casting aspersions on this magnificent hospitality." He circled round the fruit-cake appreciatively, and explained, "I was merely wondering whether that soft-footed myrmidon has pushed off for the last time now, or whether he's likely to return several times yet, bearing dishes of apes and peacocks. Because, if he's gone for good," he told the island sub-commander, "there's something I want to talk to you all about."

Wiz regarded him uneasily. The sub-commander, sprawling almost full-length in an arm-chair by the ante-room fire, was feeling more battered and exhausted than he had ever felt in his life, but he was also just beginning to feel profoundly at peace with himself. His troubles were not over, he knew. He did not think either the police inspector or the long-suffering Air Marshal would entirely overlook his conduct without awarding him some form of reprimand, official or unofficial; and he was not looking forward to those. But he had gathered

from Good King Wenceslas's oblique, re-inspiring words that he was not going to lose his island command over it, and he felt he could endure any lesser penalty philosophically now. He was in the comfortable, comatose state of the well-punished and forgiven, and he did not want anyone to rouse him out of it.

He looked furtively round the room, in forlorn hope of catching some sign in the face of one of the others that he might have mistaken the inspector's final target. But he knew, with a sinking heart, that he did not really want to see that sign in any of them. Wiz was not anxious to act chief witness for the prosecution against any of his five friends and colleagues.

In the other fireside arm-chair, Bob Ames sat scowling—looking like a murderer, Wiz told himself with a fleeting smile, but also looking like a man justly and poetically visited with a shocking attack of toothache at the hands of a dentist who had diligently drilled holes in two pain-free teeth.

Dougal, too, looked dismal enough to have murder on his conscience. But what Dougal really had on his conscience, Wiz suspected with another smile, was the appalling responsibility of inflicting an injury which still, fifteen hours after its infliction, had its victim looking so sick and sorry for himself. Wiz was not ungrateful to Dougal for that blow which had broken his head but was now saving his face.

Noel himself, Wiz knew, had just come from a mysterious half-hour with Inspector Baker and Sergeant Hughes, evolving a second, and Wiz feared a sinister, written statement. But he appeared not the slightest disturbed by this experience, as he sat side by side with Laetitia on the deep sofa, radiating the innocent aura of a couple celebrating their seventh wedding anniversary still contentedly, if spasmodically, in love.

"Aren't we going to fetch Titus and Good King Wenceslas before you cut your cake?" Wiz procrastinated hopefully.

His grateful guest bestowed on him an extremely sardonic ferret grin.

“Don’t be an ostrich,” he replied uncompromisingly. “You know perfectly well we can’t interrupt Titus and Good King Wenceslas now. I left them closeted in your office, helping the two busies make up their minds whether there’s evidence enough for an arrest.” At this brutal openness, Wiz flinched, and from the opposite arm-chair Bob Ames flinched a little too, in sympathy.

Noel surveyed them both benevolently.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about,” he told them. “You see, I don’t think myself the police are going to find that they *have* got a court case. And, that being so, as Wiz quite rightly doesn’t want you all to go on suspecting each other indefinitely—I wondered if you’d like me to tell you what really happened.”

The effect on his listeners was almost comically varied. Pip and Jo Cartwright, open-mouthed in admiration, made no verbal reply but their expressions were of sensation-eager acceptance. Bob Ames shifted uncomfortably, cast a sidelong look at his sub-commander, and mumbled, “No, Noel, I don’t think we want to know.” Wiz received the offer with the liveliest dumb agony, and Laetitia, starting up furiously, protested, “No, Noel,” and bade the others “Don’t encourage him. Sir Know-all knows no more than any of the rest of you, and he’ll land himself in a criminal libel action if you’ll let him. He changes his murderer every time he changes his underwear—last night, it was *you*,” she informed Wiz embarrassingly, “and he even had me believing it for a time. Don’t listen to him. He’s really no right.”

Noel laid a calming hand on her arm.

“All right, Tish,” he offered. “I don’t want to get you worried. I’ll tell you what—I won’t tell them who it *is*, but I’ll just point out a few people it *isn’t*. Wiz is quite right—it isn’t good for the station to leave it like this.”

Bob Ames looked up moodily.

“I don’t see how you could do that—prove who it isn’t,”

he said pessimistically. "With all of us in bed at the time, that's practically an impossibility."

"I could demonstrate *you* didn't do it, Bob. Not legally," Noel qualified hastily, as Bob sat up in a burst of hope, "but in common sense, which is all we need for the moment. I've been cross-examining Wiz pretty severely this morning, and he told me one significant thing about you."

Bob, surprised, baffled and extremely relieved, invited "Go ahead", and Noel told him, "You may or may not have guessed whom Swanton was threatening at the dinner table. Personally, I'm inclined to think you did—but that's not important. What you *didn't* do, if you'd just shot a man in honest hot blood the night before, was sit up calmly in bed next morning when you were told he'd had an accident and say you hoped he'd broken his neck. A deliberate, vicious cold-blooded murderér might do that as a bluff, if he'd nerve enough to keep his voice steady. But not a normal, decent human being. If you'd killed Swanton, you couldn't have said a thing like that without it sticking in your throat and choking you."

He turned his attention to the sub-commander.

"Wiz," he announced, "you and Dougal each clear the other. There's no possible doubt that when you two were playing Punch and Judy last night up and down the Ops Block loft-ladder, you each genuinely thought the other was the murderer. That proves neither of you could have been. Wiz might, just conceivably, have seized on that champagne cork noise to put on a magnificent red-herring act for the inspector. But he wouldn't have carried it that far. He wouldn't have stayed meekly on that ladder and let Dougal batter him to pieces if he'd known Dougal wasn't really a desperate murderer. He'd have warned him from the start, 'I've got a policeman and three dogs behind me'."

He waved a hand at Wiz's bandaged head, and pointed out, "If that blow had been half an inch higher, Wiz might have been blinded for life. He wouldn't take any bluff that far—it

wouldn't be worth it. And Dougal wouldn't do it to him, either, not unless he were genuinely and desperately fighting for his own life. If that'd been a murderer's desperation," he ended grimly, "Doug wouldn't have dropped the shillelagh and extended a prompt helping hand when Wiz told him he was falling off the ladder. He'd have hurried him along with a good, sharp shove."

There was a moment's impressed silence.

Then Jo Cartwright, stammering horribly, exclaimed dismally, "Oh, Noel! And I know it wasn't Pip and me, too!" and stared at him, aghast.

There was a little explosion of exasperation from Laetitia, and Noel glanced at her wickedly.

"What about it, Tish? Shall I tell them the whole truth?"

"You never intended anything else from the start!" she accused him, furiously angry with him.

"Didn't I?" Noel turned gently to the horrified Jo, and corrected him: "You know it wasn't *you*, Jo. But do you really know it wasn't Pip? Pip, when was the last time you took any operational photographs, not counting last night's practice with Dougal?"

Pip stared at him.

"Photographs? I can't remember, off-hand. It ~~is~~ be in the record book, though."

"It *is* in the record book," Noel confirmed ominously. "It was more than a fortnight ago." His eyes narrowed and he asked the young pilot officer, "You haven't been taking any other sort of photographs more recently than that, have you, you and Jo? Photographs you didn't enter in the record book?"

"Noel!" Wiz Merlin interrupted in sharp protest. "What a thing to suggest—why?"

"Someone was using the Project cameras on the night Swanton was shot," Noel explained, shatteringly. "That's partly what I've been making all these statements about."

You see, Wiz, after you'd checked up on those cameras and their films, the only fingerprints the police found on them were yours. But I'd been taking photographs myself, only the evening before. So that shows the cameras were among the things the killer cleaned up before he left. Now, why should he bother to do that if the cameras were in their proper place, where I left them, hanging up on their hooks inside their leather cases?"

"Why pick on us?" demanded Jo indignantly. "Why should Pip and I have to be the foreign spies?"

Noel smiled a little wryly.

"Foreign spies," he reminded him, "are Titus's copyright, not mine. You don't have to be a foreign spy, Jo, to be caught using a Service camera on an island where you're not allowed a private camera of your own." He cocked an experimental eye on the startled Pip, and suggested, "You might be a good-looking youth of nineteen whose girl friend has asked for a picture to put under her pillow."

He looked cautiously at his highly-critical wife.

"Now, I'm not suggesting this really happened," he said hurriedly, "but supposing—just supposing, one of the junior myrmidons *had* been taking snapshots for his girl. Then, while the crime was still new and heavy on his conscience, our friend Swanton bears down on the place like a whirlwind and announces he's out for someone's blood. What would the junior myrmidon do? He's a myrmidon, remember, who's fully alive to the danger of superimposed fingerprints, if that bumper-handle is anything to go by, and he hasn't officially handled a camera for nearly a fortnight."

He rounded abruptly on Pip.

"Pip, why were you so anxious to get to the Ops Block that night before Victor Swanton did?"

Pip gasped.

"I wasn't. I don't know what you're talking about."

Noel eyed him gravely.

"On two separate occasions," he reminded him, "you tried to persuade him to let *you* take his secret correspondence over, instead of him. And you were the only one who did display any anxiety to get near those cameras, you know."

"But there was nothing in that." Pip began to feel seriously perturbed. "I was the duty officer, Noel, that was all. It was my duty to offer to fetch and carry for a visiting senior officer. I didn't particularly want to—I just thought I ought. Wiz, it's none of it true. It really isn't. *You* don't believe him, do you?"

Wiz surveyed his anxious junior closely for a moment. Then, with a faint, self-conscious smile, he paid his debt of gratitude to Good King Wenceslas.

"Not if you say not, Pip," he echoed his Air Marshal, steadily.

He turned unhappily to his two civilian guests, and implored, "Noel wins, you see, doesn't he, Tisha? We can't go on, not knowing, like this. Yes, please, Noel, I think we *would* like to hear the whole truth, if you'll tell us."

Laetitia looked at him in pity, crossed the hearth and perched on the arm of his chair, running a caressing arm across the chair-back and over his shoulders. This time, there was no hint of protest from Noel.

"Wiz poppet, are you sure? I'm afraid it may be something you won't like, when you do hear it. Much better leave it to the police and Good King Wenceslas, boys. If Noel's right and they *do* know who it is, they'll take care he isn't left upsetting people on the island, even if they can't make a court case against him. Can't you leave it to them?"

"No, we can't," Bob Ames put in, startled. "Tisha, I'm hoping for a posting to Ramswell myself. That'd give rise to all sorts of intolerable rumours."

Tisha, defeated, looked at Noel, and gave a little shrug.

"Right," said Noel, not devoid of self-importance. "I'll tell you. Let's start with those cameras, shall we? If those weren't

really being used to take unauthorised snapshots for girl-friends, then they were being used for something else. weren't they?"

"Espionage!" rolled out Dougal in awe, in his high, Hebridean singsong. "So it *was* espionage, after all?"

Noel nodded, and Wiz's thoughts jumped in horror to Victor's "little Red rat".

"Not *me*, you fool," Noel answered the accusation in Wiz's shocked, expressive face with indignation. "What on earth do you think *I'd* need spy-photographs for, considering I drew all your secret charts myself in the first place, and I could draw them again tomorrow if I wanted. But why should I want—I'm not the one who's been tearing his heart out to publish the Project secrets broadcast, ever since the first Sputnik got airborne."

Laetitia felt Wiz recoil as if he, too, had been shot.

"Victor?" His voice was nearly as shrill as Dougal's.

"I'm afraid so, Wiz. I'm sorry. But everything points to it, doesn't it? Why do you think he sat up until one in the morning, rather than have your company out to the Ops Block? Just to avoid an argument with you—he could have avoided that by giving his dispatch-case to Pip to take over. And why do you think"—Noel's red-brown eyes softened slightly—"the poor devil sat here all night getting gently intoxicated? Because he was enjoying being convivial with his great friends Bob Ames and Noel Osborne, do you think? Or because even Swanton's iron nerve had to drown its qualms before it could overcome all the nightmares about courts martials and hanging and firing-squads and force him over to that Block to betray his country?"

Wiz leaned back dizzily against Laetitia's comforting arm.

"I realise now," Noel told him soberly, "what that last political argument was for. It was poor Swanton's final probe to see if there was any hope of a change of heart from me, that I'd withdraw my threat to resign with my research team in a

body if the Project were handed over to his N.A.T.O. friends legally. When he saw there ~~wasn't~~, he must have decided to take matters into his own hands. I believe he was about to hand it over illegally."

Merlin's thoughts ranged slowly over his last conversation in the Block with his dead friend, and he admitted, "You might be right! But—Noel! That's dreadful—that's criminal, even; but N.A.T.O.—N.A.T.O.'s our ally. Vic was carrying out what he thought was his duty, if that's what he was really doing. You could have reported him. They'd have cashiered him probably, or even sent him to prison. But they wouldn't have put him up before a firing-squad for that." He raised an anguished face to the physicist, and mourned, "You didn't have to shoot him!"

Noel jumped.

"Good gracious, my dear, good Wiz!" he protested, scandalised. "I didn't shoot him. I don't approve of any form of death sentence, private or public."

Wiz gaped at him, and ran a bewildered hand over his bandaged throbbing head.

"You didn't? Then who did?"

"There's only one person it could possibly be," Noel answered. "There's only one who could catch him ~~at~~ it, isn't there, and only one who'd be prepared to keep quiet ~~at~~ out it afterwards. You don't suppose Swanton'd go answering the Block door bell to every Tom, Dick and Harry once he'd got the camera out ready to be primed with commercial film."

His ferret's grin suddenly reappeared again.

"Your trouble is," he told the astonished sub-commander, "that, in spite of the way you sometimes behave, you're basically an adult. You can't follow the way these people's minds work. If *you* see a responsible and overworked colleague leaving a bunch of secret keys in a careless place, you may swear at him a little, but you do at least point it out then and there, as one adult to another. You don't lurk around

like a Boy Scout until the small hours of the morning, seeing if you can beat the station patrols on a pouring wet night and break into the Block, so you can make the poor wretch feel he's jeopardised the safety of the nation next morning."

Wiz was almost beyond speech.

"But Titus—Titus!" he protested incoherently. "Titus could never have cut that telephone cable. He'd never know how—he couldn't."

"He didn't," Noel satisfied him, calmly. "My dear Wiz, if you've got two men inside that Operations Block and one catches the other committing espionage, which of them really pulls a gun on the other, and disconnects the telephones so his victim can't raise a call for help? Which of them is more likely to try raising an alarm through Turvey—Swanton, who doesn't know there's a Naval exercise keeping Turvey on duty that night, or Titus, who doesn't even know what Turvey is, or that it ever goes off duty? Is it Swanton, or Titus, who picks up an operational telephone and asks it, 'Hello, are you there?' in that engagingly amateur way?"

His voice dropped to a low note of satisfaction.

"But who is it the second time, when Turvey rings back and gets a proper, efficient answer? That's why I don't think they'll be bringing a case to court about this," he explained. "No matter how long they keep up this ten-hour questioning session with Titus now, they'll never find any other answer. It's the purest self-defence."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

IT WAS SWANTON HIMSELF, A DAZED TITUS CONFESSED defeatedly to the policemen, who had shown him the impossibility of letting the true story of the night's tragedy be known.

Swanton's intention had been, as Noel Osborne guessed, to force the Uncle Tom Project, by direct action since verbal persuasion had failed, from an internal Air Ministry programme to a major N.A.T.O. defence. His plan was to seek the collaboration of a distinguished Cambridge physicist, submit to him the photographs of the Little Eva wiring charts and let him deduce from them the basic scientific principles from which Noel had evolved his Project. That done, Swanton would have destroyed the photographs, while the physicist, himself an ardent European-federalist, would submit an outline of the proposed defence system direct to the N.A.T.O. defence research committees, as if it had been his own independent theory.

Titus, coming into the Little Eva Block with the deliberate furtiveness of a security officer demonstrating a fault in the island's guard system, had caught his brother-in-law red-handed at the photography of the charts.

He was lucky, as Victor Swanton instantly told him, not to have his head blown open the moment he slid round the door of the Operations Office. The pistol Merlin had been flourishing at his superior was still on the table, weighing down one corner of the chart Swanton was recording. If Swanton had loosed it off at the unnerving intruder, no one, he pointed out ominously, could have blamed him.

"If you will creep in and out playing at saboteurs, Titus," the Project Commander warned the shocked and incredulous security officer, "you must take the consequences. Even if I'd only been peacefully filing away the correspondence in here, you'd still have frightened the life out of me. I can fire this off now, any time I like, and just apologise pathetically because I lost my head and tragically shot my own brother-in-law by mistake. So you'd better come to terms, hadn't you?"

There was little Titus could do about it, Swanton pointed out composedly, even if the pistol were not there. Even if he would not give the venture his active support, he could never afford to betray his brother-in-law. Swanton did not really believe, except in his worst moments of deeply-worried nightmare, that he was putting himself in danger of the gallows or the firing-squad by what he was doing, but he did believe that the consequences of exposure would be probable imprisonment and certain disgrace in the Service. This disgrace, he told Titus without compunction, would kill his father and break the heart of his sister, Titus's worshipped wife who had boasted so long of her family's long and untarnished history. It would also ruin the lives of Titus's two sons at their public school, and of Titus's godson, Swanton's own son, whose father would never afterwards earn enough even to pay public school fees for him at all.

"After that," Titus confessed tormentedly, "I knew I'd never be able to do my real duty, and report it. But I did think at least I might prevent him from carrying out the plan, if I could only save myself from that pistol. I guessed he'd never discuss a compromise while he thought he could get away with shooting me as an intruder. But if I could somehow establish my presence in the Block, he'd lose that advantage, and he might listen then.

"My chance came after we came from the dark-room, where Victor took me while he re-loaded the cameras with their Little Eva film. He went down and into the office, but I

managed to creep past, into the Operations Room. As a matter of fact, he wasn't watching me very closely then, because he knew, although I didn't, that the P.B.X. extensions in the Block were dead. He'd cut that cable soon after I arrived, I think, when I was getting out of my oilskins, and inside the lavatory. But he didn't know about the Naval Exercise, so he hadn't troubled to touch that Topsy line.

"When the P.B.X. telephone in the Operations Room sounded so dead, I looked round to see what else there might be, and saw that row of operational switch-keys at the top of the control-desk. So I went over there, and rang each one in turn, though I didn't have any real hope of getting an answer. The first time round, nothing happened. But I thought I'd give them one more try—and the second time, Topsy *did* answer.

"Victor caught me in the middle. I tried to speak low, but Topsy couldn't hear me, and when they *could* hear me—Victor heard too. He came in with that dreadful pistol levelled straight at my head, made me ring off and told me it was foolish to hope for help from the mainland. He'd cut the cable between the Operations Block and P.B.X., and that meant P.B.X. hadn't got an outside line any longer. Even if Topsy did raise an alarm, it'd have to go through Bishop Bradbury, and by the time Bishop Bradbury got a boat over here, he'd have cleaned everything up and be innocently in bed. He said it'd take at least an hour for them to reach us, which would be plenty of time, and he'd never be suspected. No one'd know what time he'd left the Block after putting the documents away, no one'd think he'd any reason to kill me, and there'd be no saying who might have stolen those keys from Sir Noel's pocket.

"Then Topsy rang back, and he warned me to keep completely quiet while he answered. He said Topsy wouldn't know it hadn't been him on the line in the first place, and if I made any scuffle, he'd still shoot me as an intruder.

"Then he turned to answer Topsy—and put the pistol on the table so he could throw the telephone switch!"

Titus raised candid, self-accusing eyes to the detective.

"It was murder, I know," he said. "I knew when I picked the pistol up, self-defence doesn't allow you to attack while you're still able to retreat, and I ought simply to have walked away. But Victor was younger than I was," he explained pathetically to Good King Wenceslas, "and he was much quicker and cleverer. I was frightened, if I did walk away, somehow he'd still get the pistol off me. So when he turned round and saw me—I shot him. I deliberately shot him, so that he couldn't shoot me."

"Is that murder?" Good King Wenceslas asked disbelievingly of the detectives.

"Yes, it is," Titus answered, with a revival of his old authoritarianism. But this time, Inspector Baker felt no impulse to laugh at him, for he went on tragically, "Victor himself showed me it was murder. The exact moment I was pulling the trigger—I saw the look on his face. He was staring at me as if he couldn't believe his eyes. And I knew then, if only I could have stopped my finger moving, I'd be perfectly safe. Victor never intended to shoot me at all. It was all bluff."

He sat for a long time in meditation.

"My first instinct," he told them at last, "was to give myself up. Not over that Topsy telephone—that was in Victor's hand, and it started quacking away while he lay there. I couldn't stand that, so I just switched it off. Then I went to the other phone, to report myself to Merlin. But of course, I got no answer, because that cable was still cut, and I remembered what Victor had said about a boat taking an hour to get here, and no one being able to know who'd had those keys.

"Cleaning up took me nearly the whole hour. I was wearing an old sweater I kept for security manoeuvres like that, and it had Victor's blood on it. But the blood hadn't set, and it

ran off under the cold tap. Victor had finished re-loading the cameras, so I just wiped his faces off them and put them away. I set fire to the commercial films, and the metal rollers," Titus confessed, a little proud of this subterfuge, "I threw into a furze-bush in the minefield. I didn't know how Victor had cut the cable, so I had to leave that until Merlin showed me where it was next morning. I got that clean while Merlin and Sir Noel were out of the room, which was why, of course, Sir Noel's fingerprints weren't on it when you tested it.

"I hadn't foreseen that." He smiled painfully. "My chief worry was about the damp pullover, which still hadn't dried properly, though I'd had it over one of the Block radiators all the time. I wasn't sure whether someone would notice how damp it was when the room-to-room search was on. But of course"—his smile was almost pitying now—"I could have saved myself the worry. Playing confidence tricks on poor Bill Merlin's like stealing the baby's rattle. He came round with me full of awe and obedience while I searched all the officers' rooms, including his own, but it never entered his head we might search mine as well."

"Merlin had worries of his own to occupy him," Inspector Baker reminded him, and Titus looked conscience-stricken.

"Yes, I know. I've felt very badly, all the time, about that. When I began it, you see, I'd no idea how that cable connection was going to limit the field of suspects, and I didn't know about the Naval exercise either. With Sir Noel's keys unwatched all night, and even a chance of outside espionage as well, I never dreamed the blame could fall on any one individual. It wasn't until next morning, when I went to sign us into the Block and found Merlin's name recorded there with Victor's, that I'd any idea he'd been over in the Block at all."

"I did what I could about that. I tore out the page, and arranged for Sir Noel to make the discovery, so Bill wouldn't be tempted to do anything clumsy when he remembered it. But I felt very sorry when I saw what a right it had put him

in; and it was even worse next day, watching him on that boat literally sick with worry that his sweetheart might think he was a murderer, and watching Inspector, drawing all the worst conclusions about it."

His voice hardened.

"But I couldn't help that. I don't know about these problems of nationalism and inter-nationalism, but I do know one thing. Deep at rock-bottom, when it comes to survival, there's only one unit that matters and that's your own family. I don't know what I'd have done if it had only been myself. But I'll tell you this, Inspector," he said, his voice breaking. "If Sir Noel hadn't given me away to you, I'd have stood by and watched you hang William Merlin and every single individual on this island, before I'd do what this is going to do to my poor wife."

Inspector Baker eyed him half critically and half compassionately.

"Perhaps you shouldn't lose heart too early, Squadron Leader Maltby-Oates," he advised him. "You may find there's no need for your wife and family to know any more about all this than you yourself care to tell them. The inquest will be in camera, remember, and the death certificate will go to Swanton's widow, not his sister. It's not my province to prophesy what either the Coroner's Jury or the Public Prosecutor may do, but my private bet is they'll probably judge you less harshly than you judge yourself."

Titus looked up at him cautiously, and he explained, "You've got a stronger case than straightforward self-defence, Squadron Leader. If a law officer acting in pursuit of his duties kills someone in an attempt to put a stop to a felony, that's a justifiable homicide. I imagine you'll find that covers your position and that, after the inquest, you'll hear no more about it."

He considered him for a moment, and added, "Let me disabuse your mind of one thing. None of your colleagues gave

you away to me deliberately. It wasn't until I heard Merlin's story that I realised where the blame must lie. I could accept, at a point that Swanton's chief administrative officer didn't know anything about the trouble over Ames's exchange posting. But I couldn't accept that Swanton's best man didn't know anything about Mrs. Swanton's previous history. I knew then that, unless you'd some extremely strong reason for keeping Merlin and Ames clear of suspicion, we'd have heard all that from you long before we heard it from Merlin. It was nothing to do with Sir Noel at all."

"Wasn't it? I thought it must have been him." Titus sounded deeply self-reproachful. "Very foolishly, you see, I gave myself away to Sir Noel before ever the crime was found out, and I've been anxious ever since, whether he was going to discover it.

"You see, to an innocent person who didn't know what had happened in the Block, there'd be no reason to think of cable trouble being traced on an operational line that wasn't being manned up at either end; and we've had one of these administrative-line failures before, so I couldn't pretend to be ignorant of what that involved.

"When the telephonist forgot to switch on his night bell earlier in the summer, the engineers who came to investigate were civilian G.P.O. linesmen from Yewmouth. That's what Merlin assumed these men were, too, until he'd talked to them.

"But I, of course, knew where that boat would be from, because Victor had already told me. And when I went up to ask Sir Noel for his keys to the Block, I automatically described it as a boat-party from Bishop Bradbury.

"It wasn't until I came downstairs again and realised Merlin didn't know who they were that I suddenly also realised I shouldn't have known either."